

# ***Of Martyrs and Marigolds: Intersection of Memoir and Fiction in Articulating Trauma and Contested History***

**Madhurima Sen**

## **Abstract**

The Partition of 1947 resulted in wide scale migration of Urdu-speaking Muslims from India to East Pakistan. Although initially welcomed as muhajirs, the hospitality for Urdu-speaking migrants was short lived in the eastern wing of Pakistan because of their perceived closeness to the West Pakistani government. The war of 1971 found a section of the migrants pledging support to the West Pakistani army, which resulted in post-war hostility against the entire community. Their predicament was such that they were denied citizenship by both Bangladesh and Pakistan. The narrative of displacement and dispossession of the Urdu-speaking minority does not fit into the dominant discourse about the war, and the predicament of this internally displaced population has been largely neglected in academia.

This paper studies the gap between statist memory and individual memory through a close reading of Aquila Ismail's 2011 novel *Of Martyrs and Marigolds*. Interrogating the dominant narrative of the 1971 war and liberation warriors, this paper demonstrates how Ismail's novel makes space for silenced memories of the subaltern. It analyses how trauma is negotiated through fiction to be transformed into a narrative memory that can be communicated with others. Raising questions about the target audience, it also attempts to understand the impetus behind writing such a narrative several decades after the events of the war. Drawing upon the long and troubled relationship between Bengali and Urdu in Bangladesh, it emphasises the intrinsic relationship between language and identity. It also argues that the hybrid genre of the novel, incorporating characteristics of memoir with fiction, is an apt medium for articulating traumatic memories. In addition, the paper interrogates some of the ambiguous silences and fissures in the novel itself, thereby opening discussions on the position taken by the author.

**Keywords:** *displacement, conflict, subaltern, minority, citizenship.*

The Partition of 1947 had resulted in wide scale migration of Urdu-speaking Muslims from India to East Pakistan. The subcontinent has a long history of migration of Urdu speakers to East Bengal since precolonial

## TRIVIUM

times. However, it is only with the 1947 Partition, more so with the 1971 War, that migration has stigma attached to it. Dina M. Siddiqi writes, the national borders between India and Pakistan cut through much older routes of travel. Many Bihari Muslims journeyed on already familiar, if circular, corridors of migration.... Until the introduction of a passport and visa scheme and the imposition of fixed national identities, there were no real barriers to labour mobility.... Refugee movements produced by partition disrupted or overrode earlier patterns of migration.<sup>1</sup>

Muslims who migrated to East Pakistan were initially welcomed as *muhajirs*. *Muhajirs* were originally the followers of Prophet Muhammad who journeyed with him from Mecca to Medina to avoid persecution. The use of religious terminology in the context of mass migration necessitated that the host country offered its hospitality to the migrants. However, the hospitality for Urdu-speaking migrants was short lived in the eastern wing of Pakistan. Owing to their shared language and culture, the West Pakistani administration saw in them loyal supporters. Redclift notes, 'The Urdu-speaking Punjabi elite dominated East Pakistan politically and economically during the period, and as a result the newly arrived Urdu-speaking British-trained army and civil servants became particularly influential.'<sup>2</sup> The linguistic and cultural difference with local Bengalis aggravated their alienation. Ilias observes that their inability to align themselves with the local population's grievances caused progressive estrangement of the Urdu-speaking migrants.<sup>3</sup> The more the Bengalis became aware of their economic and political exploitation at the hands of West Pakistan, the more hostility was transferred to the Urdu speakers, who were understood as representatives of the despotic central government.

In 1971, the Urdu speakers in East Pakistan were caught in an awkward position between the majority population of Bengalis and the ruling elite of West Pakistan. They had once uprooted their lives for the dream of Pakistan, and many believed that the state of Pakistan was essential for their prosperity and well-being. 'Consequently they also joined the anti-East Pakistani and pro-West Pakistani stream, mobilising the half-educated or illiterate, poorer, working class sections of the Biharis against the Bengali neighbours, thus forsaking the economic and political interests of their adopted home, East Pakistan', observes Hashmi.<sup>4</sup> Faced with the possibility of separation, a part of them pledged allegiance to West Pakistan and joined frenzied groups like *Al Badr*, *Al Shams* and *Razakars* to assist

Of Martyrs and Marigolds: Intersection of Memoir and  
Fiction in Articulating Trauma and Contested History

army operation. Along with other acts of wartime collaboration, the infamous mass assassinations of intellectuals a few days before the end of the war were conducted with the assistance of these paramilitary groups. However, the collaboration of some Urdu speakers resulted in retaliatory violence against the community as a whole. 'The open collaboration of some Urdu-speakers with the Pakistani army in the latter's brutal suppression of and genocidal war on Bengalis in 1971 rendered all 'Biharis' into permanent national pariahs', observes Siddiqi.<sup>5</sup> Denationalized and dispossessed, they were herded into confined settlements like Geneva Camp in Dhaka, where many continue to live even today.<sup>6</sup>

Bangladeshi historiography and literature have recorded in detail the gruesome atrocities committed by Pakistani army in the nine months of Liberation War. Ranabir Samaddar's analysis of colonial caste Hindu Bengali nationalism could be useful to understand the historiographical operation in Bangladesh as well. The two strategies mentioned by Samaddar— 'first to create a cleavage between "we" and "they" and second, to solidly construct a "we" by submerging and subsuming the internal cleavages' can be identified at work in the nationalist history of Bangladesh. Thus, he observes that the proliferation of nationalist historiography in Bangladesh is also accompanied by some uncomfortable silences.<sup>7</sup> Siddiqi, echoing Samaddar, brings to attention the absence of adequate references to or discussions on the Partition of 1947 in Bangladeshi historiography. This silence about 1947 is intrinsically connected to the complications related to the Urdu-speaking minority. Samaddar argues, 'As in India, in Bangladesh too, nationalism needs a *total* and *convincing* history. It implies, in the specific case of Bangladesh it needs a total and convincing construction of history of Muslim Society in Bengal.'<sup>8</sup> Discussions about 1947 pose the risk of opening up ambivalences and contradictions regarding the enthusiastic involvement of East Pakistan in religious nationalism, contradicting the later ethno-linguistic nationalism that led to the creation of Bangladesh. Siddiqi's suggestion that the Urdu-speaking minority in Bangladesh 'represents a less visible but enduring instance of the continued weight and paradoxical effects of the 1947 partition'<sup>9</sup> might offer a possible explanation behind the pervading silence about the community.

There are memoirs, journals, fictional narratives aplenty on the war crimes committed by Urdu speakers. Like many others, Syed Shamsul

## TRIVIUM

Haque's renowned war novel *Nishiddho Loban*, translated to English as *Forbidden Incense*, paints gruesome pictures of Biharis committing massacre and even defiling corpses.<sup>10</sup> However, the narrative of Urdu speakers and their experience of the war find no place in the dominant discourse. Novels detailing their experience, like Ismail's *Of Martyrs and Marigolds*,<sup>11</sup> Ruby Zaman's *Invisible Lines*,<sup>12</sup> and Abdus Samad's *Do Gaz Zameen*, translated as *A Strip of Land Two Yards Long*<sup>13</sup> have not received adequate scholarly attention. The predicament of this internally displaced population has hardly been written about, except by a handful of researchers like Yasmin Saikia, Sumit Sen and Dina M. Siddiqi. On the whole, although there is a burgeoning literature about post-1947 migration, very little has been written about the Muslim refugees who migrated from India to East Pakistan. Therefore, my discussions in this paper chiefly focus on the novelistic representation of the complications of language, citizenship and identity as experienced by the Urdu speakers during and after the 1971 war.

The Urdu-speaking community associated itself closely with the 'Pakistan dream' and migrated from India to be a part of a nation formed on the basis of religious unity. Delving into the fictional memoir of a Pakistani author who formerly resided in Bangladesh, this paper throws light on the memory of the war from the perspective of a community whose perceived homeland was not liberated but lost in the aftermath of 1971. This paper analyses Aquila Ismail's semi-autobiographical novel of testimony *Of Martyrs and Marigolds*, published in 2011, interrogating the official glorifying narrative of war. It complicates the monolithic understanding of the war by clearing space for minority narratives and memories of the subaltern. This paper also takes into consideration the limitations of Ismail's perspective and analyses the silences in the novel itself. Drawing upon the long and troubled relationship between Bengali and Urdu in Bangladesh, it emphasises the intrinsic relationship between language and identity. The hybrid genre of the novel, incorporating characteristics of memoir with fiction, is analysed as an apt medium for articulating traumatic memories.

*Of Martyrs and Marigolds* is set in the years 1971 and 1972 in East Pakistan and later Bangladesh. It is a semi-autobiographical novel, loosely based on the events of the author's own life. Ismail, born and educated in East Pakistan, moved to Karachi in 1972 following the creation of

Of Martyrs and Marigolds: Intersection of Memoir and  
Fiction in Articulating Trauma and Contested History

Bangladesh. The novel is written in third person but narrated from the perspective of Suri, who belongs to the Urdu-speaking minority of East Pakistan and acts as Ismail's representative in the novel. Contrary to the traditional representation of Urdu speakers, Suri's family is unswerving in their allegiance to Bangladesh. However, as the war progresses and the country gains independence, all Urdu speakers are grouped together as a community and branded as traitors. Evicted from their homes some end up in prison, some in camps and the rest in graves. Detailing the loss of family, career, property and basic human rights, the novel traces the trajectory of once loyal Bangladeshis transferring their allegiance to Pakistan.

The novel is written in the form of a fictional testimony. Even though the author does not use her own name, she has claimed that major events in the plot are based on her personal experience<sup>14</sup> and 'her own family's history in Bangladesh.'<sup>15</sup> The author identifies herself as the bearer of a mission, to ensure the dissemination of a particular interpretation of historical events from the perspective of 'her people'. The novel appears to have been written with a specific audience in mind – ones who were not 'there'. The little details of Bengali everyday life which are explained at length suggest that the novel is primarily targeted at an audience who is not familiar with Bengal.

The novel has a clearly stated mission – to create and circulate new knowledge about marginalized experiences. The novel begins with maps and abounds in references to legal facts and statistical numbers, thus making it clear that it is driven by a definite agenda. By bringing together memoir and storytelling along with detailed documentation of historical events, Ismail makes her novel appear like a piece of evidence in the courtroom, in this case, the court of the readers. Urdu-speakers were understood to be traitors to their country, equally despicable as the enemy perpetrators, if not worse. They were *muhajirs* (guests) who were supposed to have broken faith with their hosts. The term 'traitor' is loaded with unsavoury connotations in South Asia, with cultural memories of Bibhishan and Mir Zafar. Bengali words often used for 'traitor' – *biswasghatak* (slayer of trust) and *gharshatru* (enemy of one's home) are striking in their implications. The novel's purpose appears to be to exonerate the alleged traitors from the accusation of disloyalty. Such was the predicament of Urdu speakers was that they were denied citizenship by both Bangladesh and Pakistan. Thus, Ismail exhumes the forgotten mass

## TRIVIUM

graves in order to appeal to the international readers' values, calls upon them as witnesses and demands a reassessment.

In an interview, Ismail mentions her conscious choice of using fictional techniques in an autobiographical narrative: 'I am not going to put it as memoir. I am going to put it as fiction because in fiction I can bring in a lot of the other stories and make it part of that plot.'<sup>16</sup> This demonstrates that this is not just a memoir of an individual but an entire community, all whose stories the author feels the need to incorporate along with her own. Autobiography 'offers writers the opportunity to promote themselves as representative subjects.'<sup>17</sup> Ismail feels the need to make space for the narratives of her friends and relatives along with her own by manipulating the genre of memoir to integrate fiction. Throughout the novel, the author highlights the importance of storytelling and the centrality of stories in the life of the individual and the community by recounting the pre-Partition and post-migration memories of Suri's parents, and including local folklores and horror tales. Making space for these tales in the narrative is the author's way of placing primacy on the power of circulating stories in society, a power that she aspires for her narrative to have. Siddiqi argues:

From the perspective of Urdu-speakers, the nation of Pakistan (along with its citizenship conferring state apparatus) had abandoned part of the territory and people of which it had once been an integral part, leaving the former in a liminal zone. Neither citizen, nor refugee, Urdu-speakers were condemned to a form of civil death [. . .] Civil death here does not refer to a condition of exile from a particular community and its laws but to invisibility from the nation-state and secular citizenship it offers.<sup>18</sup>

Ismail's objective is to make visible a community that has been rendered almost invisible by the power politics of antagonistic nation.

The intersection of fiction and memoir gives *Of Martyrs and Marigolds* a hybridized, flexible form. In her study of childhood trauma narratives, Michelle Coupal has argued the importance of fiction and imagination in the articulation of trauma. This is a distinct category of writing often used by survivors of trauma.<sup>19</sup> The author's reliance on imagination along with facts suggests that there may not be a straightforward, uncomplicated way of accessing the traumatic past. Gilmore argues, 'Conventions about truth-telling, salutary as they are, can be inimical to the ways in which some writers bring trauma stories into language. The portals are too narrow, and the demands too restrictive.'<sup>20</sup>

## Of Martyrs and Marigolds: Intersection of Memoir and Fiction in Articulating Trauma and Contested History

Thus, fiction becomes a crucial tool in Ismail's creative testimony where she uses novelistic techniques like plotting and character development to reconstruct her traumatic memories through the medium of language. To transform the contents of her traumatic recall into language, the author takes resort to fiction.

Articulation of trauma is the first step towards restoration of order and healing, according to Judith Herman.<sup>21</sup> Cathy Caruth agrees that trauma 'requires integration, both for the sake of testimony and for the sake of cure.'<sup>22</sup> It is also a therapeutic advancement towards recognition of truth, a move away from the state of denial. Also, this vocalization can be used as a tool of activism for justice. Aquila Ismail comments about her experience of writing her trauma, 'It was not cathartic...reopened many wounds...which perhaps I could have done without but I am glad I put it down.'<sup>23</sup> She observes how it was only when she began writing down her trauma that she came to acknowledge the past in all its harshness:

It was as if you were saying, 'Yes, I did experience this. Yes, I did experience homelessness. I experienced watching a man being beaten to death. I watched a woman give birth on the side of the street. These are all actual things we saw'...It was very, very painful because until then I was involved in the act of living.<sup>24</sup>

At the outset of the novel and for a major part of it, the author represents various characters refusing to acknowledge the reality of their situation. For instance, Ammi contemplates whether to lock the doors of their house when all Urdu speakers are being herded out to internment camps by the army. Her denial of reality makes her request her helper to keep *rotis* ready for them when they come back. Similarly, the news of Suri's brothers' death is also met by a refusal to look the truth in the eye. Suri lives in denial, keeping the news of her brothers' death to herself, until she puts it in words and conveys the tidings to her mother. It is only when she accepts instead of evading the tragic truth of her life and ceases waiting for the return of her brothers that she can finally let go and decide to migrate from Bangladesh. The process of recognition of the truth is completed only when it is given expression through language. Thus, the novel may be understood as an acknowledgement of and coming to terms with the horrors of the past.

The publication of the novel four decades after the events of the war is also telling. It is published at a time of renewed interest in the fates of the 'stranded Pakistanis', with the citizenship of Bangladesh being granted to

## TRIVIUM

them at long last in 2008 and the International Crimes Tribunal (Bangladesh) of 2009 making global headlines. The Stranded Pakistanis General Repatriation Committee stated in 1979, 'We are Pakistanis stranded in Bangladesh.... We are Pakistanis by all canons of international law and ethical norms. We demand immediate repatriation to Pakistan, our homeland.'<sup>25</sup> At a time when international interest was being drawn towards the internally displaced Urdu speakers, the author's purpose is to reconstruct the historical context from the perspective of the minority. It is Suri's desire to let the world know about their ordeal, which is also the purpose behind Ismail writing the novel: 'Suri did not want to close her eyes. She wanted to see everything and bear witness. She was going to tell the world of everything that had taken place.'<sup>26</sup> The author attempts to portray the novel as an objective presentation of evidence to the readers that asks them to evaluate the situation for themselves. However, the extent of authorial neutrality in the novel is open to debate, which this essay will discuss towards the end.

An evocative scene in the novel portrays a conversation between Bengali soldiers and international journalists, where the former misrepresents the displaced Urdu-speaking women as Bengali women raped by Pakistani army. Through this depiction, the novel implicates global media for its inattention and oversight towards the violated Urdu-speaking women: 'Women raped by marauding armies made better stories anyway!'<sup>27</sup> Not only are these women at the receiving end of violence, but they are also denied their true identities. The novel, through the character of Suri, also expresses its reservations against international efforts by referring to George Harrison's song for Bangladesh. Suri quotes lines from the song, 'My friend came to me, with sadness in his eyes/ He told me that he wanted help, before his country dies/ Although I couldn't feel the pain, I had to try' and calls them 'callous' and 'hypocritical.'<sup>28</sup> The novel is the author's attempt to provide a fuller account of the traumatic ordeal of her community instead of remaining content with half-told stories narrated by others. In addition, by highlighting that the 'friend' referred to in the song is the Indian sitar maestro Ravi Shankar whose country is not Bangladesh, Ismail attempts to point out the West's tendency to concentrate solely on India in the name of South Asia.<sup>29</sup>

The title *Of Martyrs and Marigolds* establishes the significant theme of martyrdom that runs through the novel. The novel resounds with reference



Of Martyrs and Marigolds: Intersection of Memoir and  
Fiction in Articulating Trauma and Contested History

to different groups of martyrs— those who sacrificed their lives in the 1952 Language Movement and those who died at the hands of Pakistani Army in 1971. The Language Movement of 1952 was a powerful articulation of Bengali linguistic and cultural nationalism against ethno-political hegemony of West Pakistan. Among other things, one of the major demands of the movement was to advocate the continuing use of Bengali for official purposes and as a medium of education as opposed to the state imposition of Urdu. The dispute over language was one of the initial bones of contention between the two wings of Pakistan which later culminated into civil war. The novel's title asks whether the innocent Urdu-speaking civilians who were the casualty of retaliatory violence can be called 'martyrs' or not :

“Will you accept us now that we have buried three, no four in your soil?”, Suri asked the skies over Dacca.

No! Your mother was not born here, came the reply.

“But my mother is buried here and my brothers, and don't forget a little sister as well...”

Not enough. Not enough.<sup>30</sup>

It is only through the efforts of their Bengali well-wishers that Suri's mother manages to find a place in the revered Azimpur graveyard which houses the martyrs of Language Movement and where 'Only people of the soil can bring their martyrs.'<sup>31</sup>

The marigold mentioned in the title also serves as a leitmotif in the narrative. Marigolds, as the author explains, are a symbol of respect for martyrs in Bangladesh. The novel wonders why being Bengali is a mandatory criterion to qualify as a martyr for Bangladesh, why Urdu speakers cannot be considered martyrs although they too died because of their mother tongue. In a telling scene, miscreants invade Suri's family's garden and plunder their marigold plants, thus reinforcing that Urdu speakers do not even have the right to grow this sacred flower. Suri's father laments for not having opted to migrate to West Pakistan when he had the opportunity, for firmly believing that he will be welcome to stay in Bangladesh, 'Even when the marigolds blossomed in such profusion I had not been alerted.'<sup>32</sup> Thus, the flowers which signal the arrival of February, the month of commemorating language martyrs in Bangladesh, appear to be a bad omen for the Urdu speakers. Abbu's interpretation of marigolds as

## TRIVIUM

the harbinger of bad news shows the gradual alienation experienced by him and the sense of being an outsider in his own country.

Contrary to the unifying cord of religion that bound the two wings of Pakistan together, Bangladesh was held together by the thread of Bengali ethnicity and language. The very name of the new country announced it as the nation of Bengalis. In later years, the homogenisation of national identity in Bangladesh has given rise to complications not only regarding Urdu speakers but also in terms of Chittagong hill tribes like Chakmas.<sup>33</sup> *Of Martyrs* offers an opposition to the monolithic understanding of Bangladesh through the depiction of a cosmopolitan society with characters from different parts of the subcontinent—Urdu speakers, Marwaris, and Marathis. This interrogates the privileging of a unified narrative that suppresses internal differences. *Of Martyrs* is different from other war narratives because it has Urdu speakers as protagonists in their own rights instead of being passing references at the margins or as shadowy members of a multitude.

Sarmila Bose writes about the portrayal of the ‘monstrosity’ of the Pakistani army in the ‘liberation literature’ of Bangladesh where the enemies are dehumanized and demonised in contrast to the depiction of the *muktijoddhas* brave and heroic.<sup>34</sup> As Naeem Mohaiemen rightly observes about Bose, ‘Her stated agenda is to correct the bias. Yet, in that process, her research goes so far to the other side as to create a new set of biases, even more problematic.’<sup>35</sup> Unlike works such as Bose’s *Dead Reckoning: Memories of the 1971 Bangladesh War* and Qutubuddin Aziz’s *Blood and Tears*<sup>36</sup> that attempt to deny the gravity of the crimes committed by the Pakistani army, Ismail’s novel aims to draw attention to the predicament of the Urdu speakers without belittling the wounds of the Bengalis.

Although Sarmila Bose’s comments on Bangladeshi writings are deeply skewed, there understandably exists a large body of fiction that paints a glorious picture of Bengali soldiers and guerrillas. Ismail presents a stark contrast to such laudatory representations. The Bangladeshi soldiers in her novel are found ‘rifling through the bundles carried by women when they left their homes,’<sup>37</sup> making a spectacle out of publicly torturing war criminals in a crowded Dacca stadium resounding with chants of ‘*joi...joi...long live...long live Bangladesh!*’,<sup>38</sup> raping women and looting homes. In fact, at times, they appear indistinguishable from the local opportunists who take advantage of the chaos. Close on the heels of the

Of Martyrs and Marigolds: Intersection of Memoir and  
Fiction in Articulating Trauma and Contested History

recording of the exploits of war heroes comes passages of inhuman atrocity being committed by the army. Siddiqi points out, 'It is, for instance, 'common knowledge' that heavily fortified bunkers and caches of buried arms were discovered in the Bihari enclaves of Mohammadpur and Mirpur.'<sup>39</sup> The novel interrogates this 'common knowledge' by pointing out the army atrocities and arbitrary assaults in the Urdu-speaking locality of Mirpur. It demonstrates the multi-layered nature of the atrocities in order to question the use of the term 'genocide' with respect to the 1971 war. Yasmin Saikia argues against using the term 'genocide' to describe the events of 1971: "No single group had the monopoly on committing violence, nor did one single group control the production of death in East Pakistan."<sup>40</sup> She details the findings of the War Crimes Fact Finding Committee (WCFFC) formed by the Bangladesh government which creates a list of 1597 war criminals but fails to mention the atrocities perpetrated by the Mukti Bahini.<sup>41</sup> Ismail's attempt to furnish one proof after another in the manner of evidence is her endeavour to absolve the Urdu-speaking community from indiscriminate villainization. True, that the extent of her neutrality is open to question because she remains silent on Pakistan's approach towards the displaced population. However, *Of Martyrs and Marigolds*, does succeed in bringing to the fore the contested nature of the memory of 1971 and highlights different ways of memorialising disputed past.

*Of Martyrs* throws light on the transformation of national identification brought about by prolonged discrimination. Suri's family, which had once decided to throw their lot in with that of Bengal, ultimately decides to migrate to Pakistan. What is it that makes this family cease to identify as Bangladeshis? How does institutional persecution affect an individual's imagined nationhood? These are the resounding questions that the novel engages with. These questions are crucial for the larger objective of the novel in order to acquit the Urdu-speaking community against blanket charges of disloyalty.

Dina M. Siddiqi demonstrates how the 'production of a monolithic non-Bengali Cultural Other in the Bengali imaginary left little space for distinctions among 'Urdu-speakers,' the most powerful of whom were ethnically Punjabi.'<sup>42</sup> Thus, even though Suri's family condemns the actions of collaborators and pledges their allegiance to Bangladesh, they are not exempted from retaliatory vengeance as there was no space left in

## TRIVIUM

the dominant discourse for internal differences among the group of Urdu speakers:

“Some of your people brought this upon you” . . .

“Who are my people? The Jamaat-e-Islami thugs?”<sup>43</sup>

Nationalism always finds an ‘other’ to define itself against. Benedict Anderson illustrates how abstract formulations like democracy and socialism cannot attract loyalty and enthusiasm in the same vein as language, race or religion.<sup>44</sup> Sikata Banerjee writes, ‘historical evidence seems to indicate that passionate human loyalty reaches unprecedented heights when the nation, imagined as a monolithic community, faces another undifferentiated community constructed as the enemy.’<sup>45</sup> Ute Frevert, in her discussion of the Peloponnesian War, comments on how wars give rise to suspicions about citizenship, resulting in divisions into good and bad citizens, perfect subjects of the nation and internal enemies. She argues that it is in the nature of modern societies that they cannot be satisfied only with the defeat of the external enemy, but they also require ‘bad citizens’ against whom the others can demonstrate their merit.<sup>46</sup> Thus, once the main ‘enemy’, Pakistan, has been defeated, attention turned to the Urdu speakers as *jatiyo shotru* (national enemies). They were migrants who did not share the myths, symbols, cultural context with the local population. It did not help their case that they spoke Urdu in a country whose recent independence was pivoted on ethno-linguistic Bengali nationalism. More importantly, a significant section of the community had pledged allegiance to the defeated enemy and collaborated with them, which made their situation highly precarious.

The crisis of belongingness experienced by Suri is emphasized in her interactions with her Bengali lover, Rumi. Suri and Rumi both belong to migrant families. The novelist juxtaposes their families against each other to bring out the stark contrast between the fates of different groups of migrants from India to East Pakistan, depending on their language. The Bengali migrants easily assimilate with the local population; there is no question asked about their commitment or allegiance. In the absence of a degree of assimilation worth mentioning, the Urdu speaking migrants can never become more than ‘guests’ in their promised land. Derrida deconstructs the concept of hospitality to reveal the hostility that lay underneath the surface welcome, thereby coining the term ‘hostipitality’. The Urdu speakers in Bangladesh offer classic instances of ‘the foreigner

Of Martyrs and Marigolds: Intersection of Memoir and  
Fiction in Articulating Trauma and Contested History

(*hostis*) welcomed as guest or as enemy.<sup>47</sup> A similar situation can be observed in the relationship between Sindhis and Muhajirs in Pakistan. The violent political conflict between the two communities, often resulting in street fights in the 1980s and 1990s, is testament to this.<sup>48</sup> The predicament of the Urdu speakers and their lack of assimilation can be understood through what Sumit Sen has termed the ‘insider-versus-outsider syndrome.’<sup>49</sup> Thus, by the end of the novel, Suri and her family are expected to be thankful for whatever little scraps of compassion are thrown at them: ‘Be grateful we are not letting you starve,’<sup>50</sup> ‘Be grateful that Suri’s family is mostly intact.’<sup>51</sup> They do get shelter in their acquaintances’ homes but there is always a fear of overstaying their welcome.

Just as Bengali nationalism imagines Bengalis as a homogeneous community, the ‘enemy others’ are also constructed as a monolithic whole. Benveniste observes, ‘The notions of enemy, stranger, guest, which for us form three distinct entities— semantically and legally— in the Indo-European languages show close connections.’<sup>52</sup> Thus, even though Rumi does not nurture jingoistic hatred against Urdu speakers, he too utters the word ‘Bihari’ to refer to Urdu speakers:

So now you are also calling all Urdu speaking people Biharis? We are not from Bihar but from East Pakistan and now Bangladesh”, Suri was upset. Rumi’s face fell. “I don’t mean anything by it. It is no more than a term that is now being used to refer to all Urdu-speaking people. So don’t make an issue of it.”<sup>53</sup>

In this context, one also needs to keep in mind the jingoistic negative cultural connotations that the word ‘Bihari’ has come to have across the subcontinent and how it is often used as a pejorative term of abuse. Rumi keeps reiterating that the nation belongs to everyone. This makes Suri wonder if he is repeating the words to reassure and convince himself. It may also perhaps be that prolonged discrimination has planted the seeds of suspicion in Suri’s mind: ‘Why was Rumi repeating the “no my people your people” refrain?’<sup>54</sup> Ultimately, it becomes clear that the two lovers, once united through their devotion towards the student wing of Awami League, have begun imagining themselves as part of different communities. Suri, after prolonged discrimination, after being forgotten and ignored by her Bengali friends, after being cheated out of their house deeds by their Bengali family friend, begins to blame the entire community and sees Rumi as part of the problem: ‘You cruel, horrible people...you

## TRIVIUM

killed my brother....”<sup>55</sup> The breakdown of the romantic relationship serves as a signifier of the overall collapse of the kinship between the two communities. One of the major limitations of the novel is that it does not offer an adequate critique of Suri’s sweeping generalisation of Bengalis and, therefore, risks falling into the same trap of homogenisation that it posits itself against.

The novel complicates the plot by making the protagonist’s family unsympathetic towards West Pakistan. The crisis of identity and the paradoxical predicament of being an Urdu speaker in East Pakistan who supports Awami League are demonstrated in the novel through the twofold use of the accusatory epithet ‘collaborator’. Suri’s father is threatened with being termed as a ‘collaborator’ by his Pakistan-supporting neighbour: ‘You had better fix your views, Haq sahib, or...Or you will be called a collaborator, helping our enemy....’<sup>56</sup> Ironically, the Bangladesh government also decides to incarcerate him without trial on the suspicion of being a ‘collaborator’. Sumit Sen argues, ‘Bearing the label of “collaborator” was heavy for the Biharis because it meant imprisonment without proof of their having collaborated with the Pakistan authorities in the killings of Bengalis.’<sup>57</sup>

The novel demonstrates the fluidity and multiplicity of national identities. Suri’s family had once abandoned their homeland in India and identified with the cause for Pakistan. However, with the formation of Bangladesh, they are turned into unwanted minorities in the new nation and are left with no choice but to seek refuge in Pakistan. Suri’s name does not appear in the merit list of the university: ‘Your mark sheet says that you took Urdu as your vernacular subject, so how do we know you are not from West Pakistan?’<sup>58</sup> The need to prove citizenship arises only for Suri, not for others who had Bengali as their vernacular language, thereby making her question her own identity as a Bangladeshi. In the nation of Bengalis, can non-Bengalis be Bangladeshis? This is the question that runs through the novel. The following conversation between Abbu and Ammi is one out of many in the novel which demonstrates the characters’ struggle to come to terms with their national identification:

“...we are from here. All our children were born in East Pakistan...”

“Now it is not East Pakistan...It is now not the land of Muslims. It is Bangladesh...the land of Bengalis.”<sup>59</sup>

The right to a nationality is one of the fundamental rights of human

Of Martyrs and Marigolds: Intersection of Memoir and  
Fiction in Articulating Trauma and Contested History

beings. With the negotiations for mass repatriation to Pakistan going on for decades, the novel asks a thought-provoking question about the ‘right to self-determination’:<sup>60</sup> ‘does an individual have the right to choose one’s nationality?’

‘The precondition for belonging to the nation, and proof of loyalty, calls for the complete suppression of linguistic and ethnic differences’, argues Siddiqi.<sup>61</sup> In this context, it is interesting to note Bangladesh government’s attempts of homogenisation of Chittagong hill tribes and the resultant violence and political complexities. Syed Aziz-al Ahsan and Bhumitra Chakma detail how Mujibur Rahman’s insistence that the tribes embrace Bengali identity and Bengali nationalism aroused tribal anger against Awami League government.<sup>62</sup> *Of Martyrs and Marigolds* presents a similar attempt of homogenisation. Here, Suri’s family is encouraged by well-wishers to suppress their ethno-linguistic identity. It is only complete cultural metamorphosis that may ensure them a space in the newly formed nation. As they go around banks, prisons and friends’ houses in a manner resembling absurdist fiction, they are careful to speak only in Bengali. On several occasions, Suri deliberately identifies herself as a Bengali woman raped by Pakistani army in order to get her work done. Ismail exposes the loss of belongingness of the entire community through this deliberate concealment of identity.

The novel demonstrates the trajectory of home ceasing to be home and the consequent trauma of homelessness. The dispossession of the entire colony of Mirpur, inhabited by Urdu speakers, indicates the state’s decision to denationalize them:

“We are in our own country. So how can we be refugees?”

“We are not in our homes, and this makes us refugees.”<sup>63</sup>

Kamal Sadiq understands modern developing states as ones of documentary citizenship: “Documents have come to embody individual identity in developing countries. The documentation of individual identity is part of a larger infrastructure of citizenship meant to identify members of the polity, thus creating a ‘citizenship from above- from the state’.”<sup>64</sup> *Of Martyrs* demonstrates what happens when the state decides to empty existing documents of meaning: ‘Of what use was the deed to them anyway? Ammi said. Owning a house was no proof that you were of Bangladeshi soil’.<sup>65</sup> Victoria Redclift demonstrates how ‘[t]hrough the

## TRIVIUM

‘Bangladesh Abandoned Property Order’ of 1972, designed to dispose of ‘enemy property’, the appropriation of properties was legalised’.<sup>66</sup> Suri’s family, having lost their private property, ends up in the servant’s quarters in a family friend’s house. The confiscation of their house results in an obliteration of their history from the nation’s narrative: ‘Did we really ever live in these places? ...That was in another life. This was their reincarnation as refugees and household help’.<sup>67</sup> Once the family learns that all their belongings have been siphoned off, they ultimately acknowledge that they do not have citizenship rights anymore.

The novel begins with the national anthem of Bangladesh, ‘My Golden Bengal’, as its epigraph. Throughout the novel, the phrase ‘golden land’ is used repeatedly, to be precise, seventeen times. However, Ismail’s use of the phrase is laden with entirely different connotations: ‘Ammi died of a broken heart, killed by the *golden land* that had snatched away her sons’,<sup>68</sup> ‘I don’t want to live in your *golden land* anymore’<sup>69</sup> (my italics). This is not the golden land of Liberation War discourse; this is the golden land whose nine months gestation period is tainted with monstrous violence. Ismail gives a subversive twist to the common metaphorical representation of the nation as a woman in the figure of a pregnant woman, in the throes of childbirth, who lay dying on the streets with soldiers jeering at her, serving as an evocative contrast to everything glorified by the Liberation War discourse. The novel resounds in post-war disillusionment and a sense of betrayal by the nation. Here one needs to remember that Mujibur Rahman had promised to ensure the safety of the Urdu speakers as his personal responsibility.<sup>70</sup> It is the failure of the nation to protect them from vigilante justice seekers and extra-judicial killings that is at the root of the disenchantment that runs through the novel.

The inconclusive ending of the novel reflects the unresolved fate of the Urdu speakers. Dispossessed from their property by Bangladesh and denied repatriation by Pakistan, they become non-citizens of either country. Legal loopholes deny them even the status of refugees. The Urdu speakers did not qualify for refugee status according to United Nations Human Rights Commission because they are still on their land of origin, i.e., in Bangladesh. The Bangladeshi Citizenship Order of 1972 qualified as citizen every person whose father or grandfather was born in the territories now comprised in Bangladesh and who was a permanent resident of such territories on the 25th day of March 1971 and continues to



Of Martyrs and Marigolds: Intersection of Memoir and  
Fiction in Articulating Trauma and Contested History

be so resident and is not otherwise disqualified for being a citizen by or under any law for the time being in force. However, the Amendment Ordinance of 1978 found grounds of denying citizenship to Urdu speakers stating their 'allegiance to a foreign state', i.e., Pakistan.<sup>71</sup> The novel illustrates this uncertainty by depicting how Suri's family prepares to leave for Pakistan without knowing the whereabouts of all their family members. They can never know for certain whether her two brothers are lying dead in mass graves, rotting in prison or have simply disappeared. Their family manages to get tickets to Pakistan, but less well-connected families continue to languish in camps and detention centres. The novel ends without a resolution, seemingly to encourage readers to evaluate the situation and recognise the precarious position of Urdu-speaking camp dwellers in present day Bangladesh, despite citizenship rights being finally granted to them in 2008.

However, the novel shies away from discussing the Pakistani government's reluctance in accepting the Urdu-speakers who called themselves 'stranded Pakistanis'. Their predicament was that '[u]nable to claim United Nations refugee status due to a number of technicalities, this ethnic and linguistic minority was legally stateless, [. . . ]with the establishment of Bangladesh, the Pakistani nation left its Urdu-speakers 'behind,' without the latter actually leaving the space of the nation.'<sup>72</sup> Ismail is silent about Pakistan's denial of ethical and legal responsibilities towards the Urdu-speaking community in Bangladesh. The fact that Pakistan accepted a small number of refugees, mainly the ones who actively collaborated with the army during the war and provided no support for more than 2,50,000 camp dwellers, goes unmentioned.

The atrocities committed by Pakistani army overshadows in Bangladeshi national memory the reprisal against Urdu-speaking civilians. The suffering and death of millions of Bengalis eclipses the trauma and tribulations of thousands of Urdu speakers. The novel *Of Martyrs and Marigolds* tries to disrupt the national amnesia about the Urdu speakers' predicament and undo their 'civil death'. The hybrid genre combining memoir and fabula works as an adaptive form, a complex strategy employed for dealing with traumatic memories. It interrogates the exclusionary nature of national memory and brings to light marginalised narratives that question the dominant cultural memory of the war. The novel is written with a clear agenda – that of calling into question the

## TRIVIUM

institutional silence about minorities' experiences, using fiction as a tool for public testimony to recover forgotten memories. However, the novel itself, on certain occasions, falls into the trap of homogenisation that it is vocal against, having failed to adequately counter the protagonist's emotional accusations against all Bengalis for being implicated subjects. In addition, there are certain significant silences in the narrative, like that of Pakistan's refusal to accept the 'stranded Pakistanis', that reveal how the issue of the Urdu-speaking community continues to be a delicate topic in South Asia even today.

### Endnotes :

- <sup>1</sup> Dina M. Siddiqi, 'Left Behind by the Nation: 'Stranded Pakistanis' in Bangladesh', *Sites: a journal of social anthropology and cultural studies* 10.1 (2013): 150-183, 159.
- <sup>2</sup> Victoria Redclift, 'Subjectivity and Citizenship: Intersections of Space, Ethnicity and Identity Among the Urdu-Speaking Minority in Bangladesh', *Journal of International Migration and Integration* 12 (2011): 27.
- <sup>3</sup> Ahmad Ilias, *Biharis, the Indian Émigrés in Bangladesh: An Objective Analysis* (Syedpur, Bangladesh: Shamsul Huque Foundation, 2003).
- <sup>4</sup> Taj Hashmi, 'The "Bihari" Minorities in Bangladesh: Victims of Nationalisms' in Mushirul Hasan ed. *Islam, Communities and the Nation: Muslim Identities in South Asia* (Delhi: Manohar, 1998).
- <sup>5</sup> Siddiqi, 'Left Behind by the Nation', 154.
- <sup>6</sup> For an intriguing survey of inferior living conditions in present-day Bihari camps, see Ashrafuzzaman Khan and Mrinmoy Samadder. "Living Like Prisoner: Documenting the Experiences of Crime and Insecurity of Bihari Community in Bangladesh", BRAC Research Report (2007). Web. [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/228385977\\_Living\\_Like\\_Prisoner\\_documenting\\_the\\_Experiences\\_of\\_Crime\\_and\\_Insecurity\\_of\\_Bihari\\_Community\\_in\\_Bangladesh](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/228385977_Living_Like_Prisoner_documenting_the_Experiences_of_Crime_and_Insecurity_of_Bihari_Community_in_Bangladesh). Accessed 25.11.2021.
- <sup>7</sup> Ranabir Samaddar, *Many Histories and Few Silences: The Nationalist History of Nationalism in Bangladesh* (Calcutta: Maulana Abul Kalam Azad Institute of Asian Studies, 1995).
- <sup>8</sup> Samaddar, *Many Histories and Few Silences*, p. 8.
- <sup>9</sup> Siddiqi, 'Left Behind by the Nation', 152-153.

Of Martyrs and Marigolds: Intersection of Memoir and  
Fiction in Articulating Trauma and Contested History

- <sup>10</sup> Syed Shamsul Haque, trans. Arunava Sinha and Saugata Ghosh, *Blue Venom and Forbidden Incense: Two Novellas* (London: Seagull Books, 2017).
- <sup>11</sup> Aquila Ismail, *Of Martyrs and Marigolds* (CreateSpace, 2011), Kindle.
- <sup>12</sup> Ruby Zaman, *Invisible Lines* (Noida: Harper Collins, 2011).
- <sup>13</sup> Abdus Samad, trans. Jai Ratan, *A Strip of Land Two Yards Long* (Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1997).
- <sup>14</sup> ‘Dispossession and conflict: A Pakistani’s experience amid the creation of Bangladesh’. *YouTube*, uploaded by VCast Online, 15 May, 2019. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7DAile00FdE>:25. Accessed 10.01.2021.
- <sup>15</sup> VCast, 0:25.
- <sup>16</sup> VCast, 04:24-04:36.
- <sup>17</sup> Leigh Gilmore. *The Limits of Autobiography: Trauma and Testimony* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2001), p. 4.
- <sup>18</sup> Siddiqi, ‘Left Behind by the Nation’, 165.
- <sup>19</sup> Michelle Coupal. ‘Storied Truths: Contemporary Canadian and Indigenous Childhood Trauma Narratives’, *Electronic Thesis and Dissertation Repository* (2013) <https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/etd/1274>. Accessed 10.01.2021.
- <sup>20</sup> Leigh Gilmore, ‘Limit-Cases: Trauma, Self-Representation, and the Jurisdictions of Identity’. *Biography* 24.1 (2001): 128-139, 129.
- <sup>21</sup> Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence- From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (New York: Basic Books, 1992), p.1.
- <sup>22</sup> Cathy Caruth, ‘Recapturing the Past: Introduction’. *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (Baltimore; London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), p. 153.
- <sup>23</sup> VCast Online, 03:21-03:35.
- <sup>24</sup> VCast Online, 02:50-03:15.
- <sup>25</sup> Siddiqi, ‘Left Behind by the Nation’, 164.
- <sup>26</sup> Ismail, *Of Martyrs and Marigolds*, p.220.
- <sup>27</sup> Ismail, *Of Martyrs and Marigolds*, p.218.
- <sup>28</sup> Ismail, *Of Martyrs and Marigolds*, p.164.
- <sup>29</sup> For more on Indocentrism in South Asian studies, see Ananya Jahanara Kabir. *Partition’s Post-amnesias: 1947, 1971 and Modern South Asia*. (New Delhi :Women Unlimited, an associate of Kali for Women, 2013).
- <sup>30</sup> Ismail, *Of Martyrs and Marigolds*, p.291.
- <sup>31</sup> Ismail, *Of Martyrs and Marigolds*, p.291.
- <sup>32</sup> Ismail, *Of Martyrs and Marigolds*, p.201.
- <sup>33</sup> For more on this, see Kabita Chakma and Bina D’Costa. ‘Chittagong Hill

## TRIVIUM

- Tracts: Diminishing violence or violent peace?’ in Edward Aspinall, Robin Jeffrey, Anthony J. Regan eds., *Diminishing Conflicts in Asia and the Pacific: Why Some Subside and Others Don't* (New York: Routledge, 2013).
- <sup>34</sup> Sarmila Bose, *Dead Reckoning: Memories of the 1971 Bangladesh War* (Delhi: Hachette India, 2011).
- <sup>35</sup> Naeem Mohaiemen, ‘Flying Blind: Waiting for a Real Reckoning on 1971’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, 46.36 (2011).
- <sup>36</sup> Qutubuddin Aziz, *Blood and Tears* (Karachi: United Press of Pakistan, 1974).
- <sup>37</sup> Ismail, *Of Martyrs and Marigolds*, p.3.
- <sup>38</sup> Ismail, *Of Martyrs and Marigolds*, p.4.
- <sup>39</sup> Siddiqi, ‘Left Behind by the Nation’, p.163.
- <sup>40</sup> Yasmin Saikia. *Women, War and the Making of Bangladesh: Remembering 1971* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), p.57.
- <sup>41</sup> Saikia, *Women, War and the Making of Bangladesh*, p.59.
- <sup>42</sup> Siddiqi, ‘Left Behind by the Nation’, p.154.
- <sup>43</sup> Ismail, *Of Martyrs and Marigolds*, p.231.
- <sup>44</sup> Benedict Anderson. *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 1991).
- <sup>45</sup> Sikata Banerjee, *Make Me a Man: Masculinity, Nationalism and Religion in India* (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 2005), p.5.
- <sup>46</sup> Ute Frevert, ‘Citizens at war: traitors and internal enemies’, in Peled, Yoav, Noah Lewin-Epstein, and Gai Mundlak eds., *Democratic Citizenship and War* (London: Routledge, 2014).
- <sup>47</sup> Jacques Derrida. *Of Hospitality*, trans. Rachel Bowlby (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), p.45.
- <sup>48</sup> For more on this, see Oskar Verkaaik, ‘Fun and violence. Ethnocide and the effervescence of collective aggression’, *Social Anthropology* 11.1(2003), 3-22. doi:10.1017/S0964028203000016.
- <sup>49</sup> Sumit Sen. ‘Stateless Refugees and the Right to Return: The Bihari Refugees of South Asia- Part 1’, *International Journal of Refugee Law* 11.4 (1999), 625-645, 626.
- <sup>50</sup> Ismail, *Of Martyrs and Marigolds*, p.221.
- <sup>51</sup> Ismail, *Of Martyrs and Marigolds*, p.282.
- <sup>52</sup> Emile Benveniste, *Indo-European Language and Society*, trans. Elizabeth Palmer and Jean Leallot (London: Faber, 1973), p.294.
- <sup>53</sup> Ismail, *Of Martyrs and Marigolds*, p.233.
- <sup>54</sup> Ismail, *Of Martyrs and Marigolds*, p.13.

Of Martyrs and Marigolds: Intersection of Memoir and  
Fiction in Articulating Trauma and Contested History

- <sup>55</sup> Ismail, *Of Martyrs and Marigolds*, p.288.
- <sup>56</sup> Ismail, *Of Martyrs and Marigolds*, p.174.
- <sup>57</sup> Sen, 'Stateless Refugees- Part 1', p. 634.
- <sup>58</sup> Ismail, *Of Martyrs and Marigolds*, p.86.
- <sup>59</sup> Ismail, *Of Martyrs and Marigolds*, p.8.
- <sup>60</sup> Sumit Sen. 'Stateless Refugees and the Right to Return: The Bihari Refugees of South Asia- Part 2'. *International Journal of Refugee Law* 12.1 (2000): 41-70, 48.
- <sup>61</sup> Siddiqi, 'Left Behind by the Nation', p.166.
- <sup>62</sup> Syed Aziz-al Ahsan and Bhumitra Chakma, 'Problems of National Integration in Bangladesh: The Chittagong Hill Tracts,' *Asian Survey* 29.10 (1989): 959–70. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2644791>.
- <sup>63</sup> Ismail, *Of Martyrs and Marigolds*, p.215.
- <sup>64</sup> Kamal Sadiq, *Paper Citizens: How Illegal Migrants Acquire Citizenship in Developing Countries* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p.102.
- <sup>65</sup> Ismail, *Of Martyrs and Marigolds*, p.272.
- <sup>66</sup> Redclift. 'Subjectivity and Citizenship, p.30.
- <sup>67</sup> Ismail, *Of Martyrs and Marigolds*, p.271.
- <sup>68</sup> Ismail, *Of Martyrs and Marigolds*, p.291.
- <sup>69</sup> Ismail, *Of Martyrs and Marigolds*, p.292.
- <sup>70</sup> *The Times* 11 May 1972, cited in Sen, 'Stateless Refugees- Part 1', p.634.
- <sup>71</sup> Redclift, 'Subjectivity and Citizenship', p.31.
- <sup>72</sup> Siddiqi, 'Left Behind by the Nation', 154.