

Ghosh, Vishwajyoti (ed.) (2013). *This Side, That Side: Restorying Partition.* New Delhi: Yoda Press, pp. 336

Siddiqui, Shahid (2014). *The Golden Pigeon.* Noida: HarperCollins Publishers, pp. 252

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In this review essay, I am going to deal with two recent narrative works that partially share the same macro-theme, i.e., the traumatic experience of Partition that reshaped many of the borders, lives and communities of the Indian subcontinent and whose heritage loomed for a very long period. It is here important to remember that, before 1947 the year of Independence, this area was very different from today's reality: the Indian colony (known as the Raj under the British rule), and before that the Mughal Empire, was actually a huge territory clustering together different cultures, traditions, religions in a context that did not follow the artificial idea of nation-state of the modern age. The two texts here presented elegantly adopt and adapt specific linguistic and rhetorical strategies to tackle these issues: the book edited by Vishwajyoti utilises the stylistic and semiotic peculiarities of graphic narrative, emphatically in black-and-white pictures (and photos), whilst Siddiqui opts for a more traditional genre (the novelistic format), although he also updates the postcolonial echo of magical realism. Through these very different means, the two works unearth the multiple meanings and repercussions of Partition, a key historical event in South East Asia, whose consequences still reverberate and affect these societies.

An ambitious, complex and stimulating project, *This Side, That Side* is a volume published with the support of Goethe Institut/Max Mueller Bhavan (Delhi) and features twenty-eight stories, most of which are the product of the collaboration between graphic artists and writers from the entire subcontinent. The choice of black-and-white for the images should not be considered as a restriction, as the artists involved succeed in fully exploiting the shades of black, white and grey with remarkable effects. For technical reasons, it is not possible to reproduce panels or extracts of the book here, but the quality of the volume is highly ground-breaking with its apt amalgamation of pictures, photos, captions, fonts and other elements, and it is finely matched with the vigour and vitality of the stories imagined by the various authors.

«An Old Fable», co-authored by Tabish Khair and Priya Kuriyan, pivots around the question of a baby who is claimed for by two women, respectively supported by either a «saffron crowd» and a «green crowd» (p. 21), thus with explicit chromatic symbolism referring to Pakistan and India respectively. The King, a moustached character dressed in tailcoat, top hat and monocle, stereotypically embodies colonial power, and following the principle of alleged western rationalism affirms that «two women having a baby together! It's illogical. It's unscientific! It's unnatural! It's illegal! It's... it's impossible» (p. 21). His final decision is to 'cleave' the creature into two parts, but eventually there will be three chunks, mirroring in the real world the creation of three separate nations (India, Pakistan and subsequently Bangladesh). With its plethora of pictorial references (chief historical figures such as Mahatma Gandhi and Queen Victoria are easily recognisable), the story highlights with bitter irony and narrative fantasy the node of dividing countries in tandem with the idea of dividing peoples and cultures as if 'surgical' cuts could redesign entire nations, histories and traditions.

The stories collected in this volume also take into consideration the inheritance of Partition in the contemporary age, with the progressive worsening of the relations between India and Pakistan and the practical consequences affecting everyday life. Written by Beena Swarwar and illustrated by Prasanna Dhandarpale, the story titled «Milne Do!» considers the difficulty not only in establishing contacts between India and Pakistan, but even in obtaining normal travel documents to go beyond the border. And yet the text emphasises the common roots in a long initial caption, which is worth quoting at length:

So here we are, two neighbours. Same people. We share a history and general culture. We love the same films. When we meet in a third country, we become best friends, burying our same differences. But in our own neck of the woods we could be aliens at opposite ends of the world, 'othering' the other side. The hawk eyes ensure the lack of interaction between the peoples. Not because the people don't want it but because the visas are difficult to get. But then, even with such difficulties come opportunities. (p. 312)

Amit and Beena, the two protagonists of the story, two journalists respectively from India and from Pakistan, discuss the cultural clichés that people mentally projected onto the 'other', as a symbol of threatening diversity, in order to comprehend better the real contemporary world and overcome difference.

As noted above, the book extensively employs a variety of representational modalities and textual devices: the story «Welcome to Geneva Camp» for instance derives from a previous multimedia project and fea-

tures the photos of freelance photographer Maria M. Litwa. It deals with another aspect of the macro-theme of Partition, namely the persecution of the Bihari ethnic minority following the war that brought to the birth of Bangladesh in 1971. Having obtained citizenship, the Bihari population was eventually lodged in dire conditions in Camp Geneva, namely decrepit facilities accommodating some 25,000 people. Rina, a 14-year-old housewife, is present in many striking photos, often accompanied by her first-person narration: «I don't go to school anymore although I'd really like to. My husband's family doesn't want me to go. They can't afford to send me or even their own children to school. We are a family of 16 members» (p. 252). The human desperation and resignation that emerge from this text again are another dreadful outcome of the political repercussions of Partition, a kind of scar that does not seem to heal any longer.

All stories in fact focus on the idea of division, fragmentation, borders: for example «Tamasha-e-Tewal» by Arif Ayaz Parrey (a Kashmiri writer) and Wasim Helal (a visual artist from Kolkata) is located in the Pakistani border town of Tewal, with a river severing the territories of two nations. The sense of opposition is graphically rendered with texts not only in English but also in Urdu and Hindi (respectively written in Persian and Devanagari scripts), which refer to propagandistic messages aired by the frontier armies of the two countries through loudspeakers. A line from the local pandit («I regretted being deaf in childhood. Now I enjoy it», p. 117) implicitly denounces the absurdity of nationalistic ideology grounded upon the meaning of separation.

Unfortunately many contributors to this original volume are not known to the general western readership, but nonetheless they offer an incredible range of insights into a devastating period of contemporary South Asia. The subtitle of the collection alludes to both the potential of using other textual resources for developing these narratives as well as to the importance of recovering memory, which otherwise would be subjected to obliteration. Thus, since the language of comics is particularly appealing to younger generations, it is hoped that the volume will lead different layers of society to discuss and reflect on the turns of history and the ferocity of man.

The heaviness of Partition, with its implication of division and separation, constitutes the textual backbone of Shahid Siddiqui's novel too, although in parallel this also aims to illuminate the Mughal period of India, which was characterised by fine culture, poetry and magnificence. Moreover, the book – written in beautiful Indian English – revises the Rushdinian trope of 'magical' (twin) children, born on the miraculous moment of passage dated 14th August 1947, by which the lives of two brothers will be intimately associated with the fate of two countries. In 1950, Ajaz and his father migrate to Pakistan, which they consider their real homeland, whereas the other brother, Shiraz, remains in Old Delhi, with his mother Hina Begum, and his

determined grandmother Qudsia Begum, the direct heir of the last Mughul Emperor, Bahadar Sha II (who reigned from 1837 to 1858).

Chronicling a few decades of Indian history, the novel is based on Shiraz's focalisation and enriched by elements of magical realism. The old Qudsia Begum is said to be able to speak with jinns, and the protagonist is visited by the ghosts of the old emperors, in particular the Emperor Babur (on the throne from 1526 to 1530), from whom he acquires a supernatural gift: when he is unjustly chased by the police, he is turned into a pigeon, and so he is able to fly across borders to reach his half-family in Pakistan. Although a pigeon may look like a humble, even insignificant animal, in reality it is an important zoomorphic icon suggesting images of freedom and movement. In a dream experienced by the protagonist, the spirit of Babur emphasises these qualities: «Pigeons are more powerful than eagles. They can fly faster, they have more endurance, greater stamina. Their vision is as strong as that of an eagle» (pp. 130-131). The connection with this type of bird is further reinforced by onomastic echoes because the name of the protagonist relates to a «famous homing pigeon» (p. 36) from an ancient Iranian city. The aerial imagery is also suggested by the games of kite-flying, a pastime which is very common in many Asian contexts and which appears in several parts of the novel.

The presence of twin brothers points to a sense of duplicity, or a kind of cleft identity representing the bisection brought about by Partition. Indeed, according to the ghost of Babur, the two siblings originally «were one. Your mother was supposed to give birth to one boy, but they were divided on the night of 14 August by some evil forces. You are two halves of one single whole. You were incomplete without each other. [...] The fact is that you have merged into each other» (p. 191). For Siddiqui too, therefore, the relationship between countries and people is intimate and operates in a reciprocal manner to construct and convey different aspects of the same background, ultimately celebrating human diversity and cultural wealth.

The book mentions various places across the entire subcontinent, from the bylanes of Shahjahanabad, the walled city of Delhi, named after the fifth Mughal emperor (in power from 1628 to 1658), to other important cities such as Calcutta, «the first capital of British India» (p. 95), or Lahore, the Pakistani city renowned for its flowery *ghazals* in Urdu and its ancient Mughal links. But it also focuses on urban and cultural milieus, like the intricate buildings (*mohalla*) in which chaotic and happy families from different traditions cohabit together peacefully. These are places that encapsulate stories and memories because:

A mohalla is not just a physical space but also a state of mind. It is a world within a world, a community of families living in a walled enclosure, where people share pain and pleasure, food and festivals. It is like a huge family living in different houses but sharing everything. (p. 15)

It is a teeming microcosm, thus, which enhances contacts amongst members of different communities, and which, consequently, goes beyond the sense of restrictions and prescriptions.

The presence of magic emerges from the very beginning of the text, when the protagonist – who introduces himself as an elderly émigré in present-day England – narrates his story in retrospect and talks about his visions, and his relationship with this bizarre world:

The ghosts of Ballimaran never leave me alone. They have a habit of jumping out at me at any time, at any place, without any notice. [...] People think I am losing my mind, I am getting old, but that is not true. I have seen all these characters riding on my shoulders and interfering with my life since my childhood. (p. 13)

Moving between various narrative layers, the paranormal aspect of *The Golden Pigeon* can be seen to function as an expedient through which fiction can examine and deconstruct a series of central issues in the history of South Asia. In this light, therefore, creative imagination turns out to be a tool to handle thorny questions related to the tragedy of Partition, and the sense of history in a wider scope, in the attempt to approach and understand contemporary reality. The weightiness of the theme, however, is sometimes balanced by some touches of humour, for example when the old grandmother in praising the English language affirms that «even her jiins preferred to converse with her in English these days» (p. 18). Perhaps this is another (parodic) strategy to come to terms with the entanglements of the past, in a circularity of cultures that returns dignity and awareness to peoples.

