



Unravelling the Emotional History of a Young Nation with Passion and Empathy

‘Bangladesh: Writings on 1971, Across Borders’, a compelling anthology edited by Rakhshanda Jalil and Debjani Sengupta, brings together literary voices from Bangladesh, Pakistan and India that capture the turbulent period marking the Bangladesh Liberation War 50 years ago.

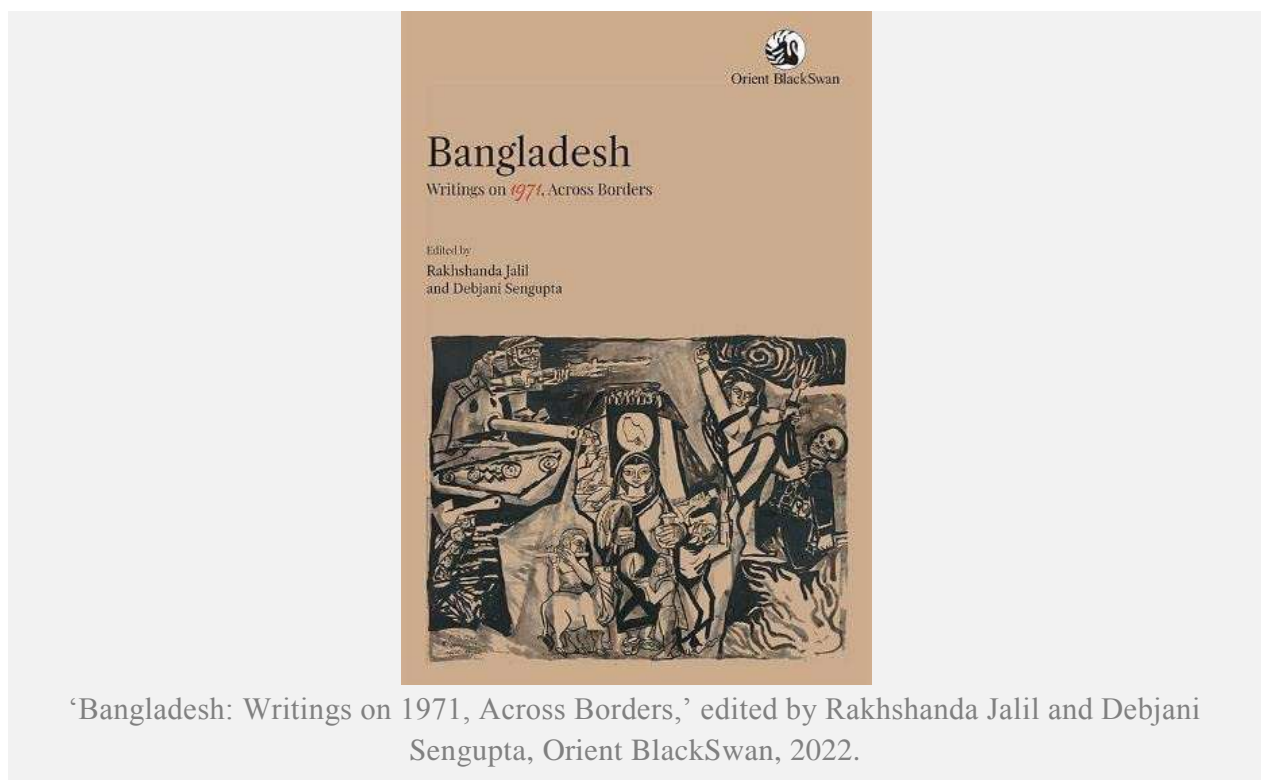


A detail from Chittoprasad Bhattacharya's painting 'Bangladesh War - 1971', featured on the cover of the anthology 'Bangladesh: Writings on 1971, Across Borders'.

Marking 50 years of independence is a significant milestone for any nation, often prompting a look back at the journey or decisive moment that transformed freedom from a dream to reality.

All the more so for a country like Bangladesh (erstwhile East Pakistan), for the ripples of its war of liberation against Pakistan in 1971 added yet another layer of complexity to the historical, political and cultural weave of the subcontinent in the 20th century – the partition of Bengal in 1905 by the colonial government; the rupture created by Partition in 1947 following which Muslim-majority East Bengal became a part of Pakistan; and the push for freedom in 1971, supported by India, which was inspired by a deep emotional attachment to the mother tongue, making it a war fought on the grounds of linguistic nationalism.

The lifespan of East Pakistan, from 1947-1971, was short. The partition in 1947 may have been traumatic, but an unseen problem started with Pakistan's compulsory and coercive introduction of Urdu as the medium of instruction in Bengali-speaking East Pakistan. In 1952, the Language Movement was launched by the intelligentsia, rejecting Urdu as state language. The Bengali-speaking citizens of East Pakistan, Muslims as well as Hindus, could not accept a linguistic regimentation and cultural disciplining that was rupturing their rich cultural heritage.



Like any intense, violent historical juncture, 1971 triggered its share of contested narratives as well as reconciliatory reflections. Now, 50 years later, comes an absorbing anthology of voices from Bangladesh, Pakistan, and India, to recount and relook at the exhilaration and trauma of those turbulent months in which the Liberation War unfolded.

Bangladesh: Writings on 1971, Across Borders, edited by Rakhshanda Jalil and Debjani Sengupta (Orient BlackSwan, 2022), is an outstanding compilation of the emotional history of this young nation – a nation with a layered past, with ruptures of shifting borders that created a deep quest for a sense of belonging.

In the three essays, seventeen fictional narratives and twenty poems included in the anthology, from Bangla, Urdu and English, a large number are translations from Bangla and Urdu. Some of the pieces have been translated for the first time. The writings range from the 1970s to the present.

Jalil and Sengupta, who have translated some of the pieces, demonstrate their intimacy with the source text. The English translations, which do not seem to compromise on the subtleties of region-centric and culture-specific descriptive details, are reader-friendly. The ease with which dialogues have been translated shows the skill of the two experienced translators.

The first essay *With the Hamzapur Tigers*, originally published in 2013, is by Kaiser Haq, who had joined the freedom fighters. It provides a detailed description of how young men joined the Liberation War with selfless zeal, inspired by their dream of a better future. Haq highlights the unsung heroes of 1971, many of whom were martyred. They were mostly ordinary people, not of the educated classes.

The other two essays, by Manas Ray and Meher Ali, have been written for this volume. Ray's essay *The Unputdownable 70s: Memory Matters* recreates the Calcutta of the 1970s, and the Naxalite upsurge, while Ali's essay *Between Remembering and Forgetting: 1971 and An Inheritance of Loss* recounts the story of his grandfather's posting in East Pakistan and the atrocities carried out by the Pakistani administration for which it has never given an official apology. Ali's rhetorical query has a searing quality – "What did Pakistan lose in 1971? A war certainly, but also a part of itself – akin, as others have put it, to the loss of a limb."

Truth may sometimes be stranger than fiction, but fiction lends a timeless aura to the temporal. The fictional narratives vary in their representations according to the ideological standpoint of the authors, but all of them provide graphic details of violence, threats, horror, fear and suspicion, as well as the determination and resilience of the people.

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The ruthlessness of the Pakistani army is scripted in each fictional narrative, including those by Pakistani writers, be it Tariq Rahman's unnerving

story *Bingo* (1973), originally in English, or the deeply subjective excerpt from Sorayya Khan's English novel *Noor* (2006) where Ali, who had fought the 1971 war as a member of the Pakistani army, tells his mother Nanijaan that war on the ground is a struggle for survival rather than ideologies: "We were fighting for our lives. Not for you. Or this country. For ourselves. We were out there in the f[*]cking swamps, fighting stingers, Indians and Bengalis alike..."

On its part, *The Raincoat* (1997), a story in Bangla by the inimitable Akhtaruzzaman Elias, translated by Debjani Sengupta, alerts the reader that in this volume the experiential and the subjective come together to recreate those traumatic nine months of the Liberation War

The evocative and poignant stories are powerful and disturbing, destabilising received notions of human values, ethics and empathy. *Betel Leaf* by Sameena Nazeer, originally written in Urdu in 2020 for this volume and translated by Haider Shahbaz, underscores the problematics of identity politics and cultural politics. The various divides – be it Bengalis, Biharis and Pakistanis, or Urdu-speakers and Bangla speakers – are highlighted to suggest that insider/outsider dynamics destroys all sense of amity.

The Urdu poems by Naushad Noori, Faiz Ahmed Faiz, Afzal Ahmad Syed, Zehra Nigah and Jan Nisar Akhtar, sensitively translated by Rakhshanda Jalil, will resonate in the minds of readers. The last two lines of Faiz's short Urdu poem *Upon Returning from Dhaka* (1974) leaves us with a lingering doubt whether mutual cultural understanding, harmony and empathy are feasible at all:

*All that I had gone to say to them at risk of life, Faiz
After all the talks and meetings that remained unsaid*

This well-researched volume with its compilation of essays, fiction, and poetry as well as an introduction will be of value to faculty members, researchers and students of South Asian studies, world literature studies and cultural studies. Lay readers will find the aesthetically rendered literary pieces, that recreate with passion and empathy the history of the young nation of Bangladesh, a rich learning experience.

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