

## **(Re)constructing the Bengali as ‘Other’: Propaganda and Resistance in Immediate Post-1971 Pakistani Fiction**

**Madhurima Sen**

*University of Oxford, UK*

### **Abstract**

During the war of 1971 and for a considerable amount of time afterward, manipulation of media reports and military propaganda in Pakistan contributed to cultural stereotypes of Bengalis as ‘others’. This paper analyses two immediate Pakistani fictional responses to the war published in 1973: “Bingo” by Tariq Rahman and “Hearth and Home” by Parveen Sarwar. It considers the relationship between literature as a medium and the rigid structure of religious nationalist loyalties and state propaganda, probing the dynamics between imaginative fiction and the top-down approach of statist historiography. It draws attention to the heterogeneity of literary strategies employed by authors and their divergent engagements with formulaic images of the Bengali ‘other’, which in turn shape the construction of national identity in the narratives. Along with focusing on the role of literature in ‘shattering the silence’, it aims to foreground the role played by fiction in maintaining stereotypical, archetypal, and antagonistic inter-ethnic relations.

**Keywords:** War, Othering, Religion, Nationalism, Propaganda, Resistance

### **Introduction**

Literature in South Asia plays myriad roles; at times, it eloquently tells the story of the subaltern and shatters the silence around the politics of otherization and oppression of minorities; however, it also plays an undeniably important role in maintaining stereotypical, archetypal, and antagonistic inter-ethnic relations. In South Asia, it is as much a medium for propaganda as it is for articulating resistance. In whichever manner it is used, literature has the potential to shape public opinion, which is, in turn, shaped by it. It has the potential to cause as much injury as it can bring about positive action. The numerous conflicts in South Asia act as pivots around which revolve many such conflicting fictional discourses wherein the representation of the ‘other’ gains utmost importance. This article studies the construction of the Bengali ‘other’ in immediate post-war Pakistani fiction through an analysis of two short

stories written in 1973. I argue that these short stories, through the portrayal of the dynamics between the imagined self and other, provide an apt entry point into the process of ‘engineering’ national identity and comment on the complex relationship between literature and state apparatuses. This article uses the term ‘engineering’, following Dominic Thomas’s introduction of the term in his study of nationalism and propaganda in Francophone African literature:

The term engineering then has the possibility of situating those voices attempting to exercise control over the various mechanisms of power, while recognizing that this pluralism emerges from often antagonistic coexistence, that its polyvocality inherently functions, negotiates, and competes at different levels, and that various identities are not freely or independently formed but rather mechanically clash in a constitutive framework. (Thomas 2)

Thomas’s reference to postcolonial national identity formation as ‘engineering’ provides an appropriate framework for understanding the complexity of the processes involved in the production and dissemination of nationalist ideology in Pakistani literature. This polyvocality and pluralism become especially conspicuous and revealing in the context of war-related writings in the immediate aftermath of 1971, as they help one understand what Wolfgang Schivelbusch has called ‘the culture of defeat’. This article contends that the ‘culture of defeat’ in post-war Pakistan was extraordinarily complicated and heavily depended on the construction, negative or otherwise, of the Bengali ‘other’.

In this context, this article examines two Pakistani short stories published in the immediate aftermath of the war at a time when Pakistan was enduring the agony and shame of losing half of its territory and more than half of its population. It draws attention to the heterogeneity of literary strategies employed by authors and their divergent engagements with cultural stereotypes about the Bengali ‘other’ to present diverse political positions with respect to the war. The first section of this article, through reference to political speeches and

newspaper reports, contextualises the discussion in the socio-political scenario of Pakistan at the end of the war. The second section examines an instance of the propagandist potential of literature through the analysis of Parveen Sarwar's Urdu short story "Ghar Angan", translated to English as "Hearth and Home". In the final section, I study "Bingo" by Tariq Rahman to emphasise how literary form allows transgression and subversion of dominant narratives of nationalism and otherization through the skillful use of irony.

### **"Truth consists in what benefits my country": Censorship and media manipulation**

I speak to you once again in the midst of the grave crisis thrust upon us by our unscrupulous and hostile neighbor, which I know is a source of extreme concern and anguish to all of us. The massive armed aggression launched by Bharat [India] continues unabated.

The nation's response to my call for action in defense of the country has been magnificent. The heroic fight put up by our armed forces in East Pakistan against overwhelming odds will go down in history as an epic of indomitable courage, reminiscent of the highest traditions of the soldiers of Islam.

Though vastly outnumbered and cut off from supplies and reinforcements by land, sea and air due to enemy blockade, these Ghazis of Islam held out for months against a perfidious and ruthless enemy, massively equipped and backed by a superpower.

It is for these reasons that we have been overwhelmed in the eastern sector, but a temporary setback in one theater of war does not by any means signify the end of the struggle.

We may lose a battle, but final victory in this war of survival shall Inshallah be ours.  
(*New York Times* 17)

This fascinating speech was delivered by Yahya Khan, the then President of Pakistan, after the unconditional surrender of the Pakistani army to the joint forces of India and Bangladesh on December 16, 1971. In its coupling together of religion and nationalism, glorification of military actions and consequent erasure of the mass violence perpetrated by the army, downplaying of the significance of the loss suffered, and presentation of false hopes of imminent victory, this speech is representative of Pakistan's mainstream and statist approach towards the 1971 war. Particularly interesting in this speech is the image of the "Ghazis of

Islam”, that is, the Pakistani army, fighting against “a perfidious and ruthless enemy”, that is, the Bengali other, who are being assisted by the Indian “superpower”, a second, seemingly more dangerous ‘other’. This speech reveals the dynamics between the complex workings of nationalism and the mutually dependent constructions of the self and the other.

The 1971 war between the two wings of Pakistan was a watershed moment in the geopolitics of South Asia. 1947 saw the formation of Pakistan based on religious nationalism, with two wings separated by thousands of miles of Indian territory. However, the relationship between East and West Pakistan soon became tangled in disputes over the attempted imposition of Urdu as the official language, the unequal distribution of opportunities and resources, and asymmetrical development in the two wings. These longstanding issues came to a climax in the war of 1971, which resulted in the separation of the eastern wing and the creation of Bangladesh. The ethno-linguistic nationalism that formed the basis of the Bangladesh movement was in clear opposition to the religious nationalism that formed the foundation of the dream of Pakistan. The fact that many of the Bengali forces received training and support from India and that leading Bengali politicians sought refuge there contributed to the perception of Pakistani military actions in its eastern wing as a holy war fought to protect Islam from the aggression of Indian and Bengali heretics. Therefore, military defeat at the hands of Bengali liberation forces and the Indian army came as a staggering blow to the national ideology of Pakistan.

The sense of bewilderment and shock of West Pakistani citizens at their army’s defeat was exacerbated by stringent state control over and manipulation of the media, which, till the very end, professed to be on the path to decisive victory. The 1971 war presents perhaps the epitome of censorship in the history of Pakistan. Media blackouts, distorted reports, and strict government control over foreign publications in West Pakistan resulted in public unawareness

of the violence and atrocities in the eastern half. Misinformation and media deceptions inflamed the long-standing suspicion of the rival neighbour, India, and alienated the West Pakistani public from the Bengali cause. The blending of religion and nationalism in official discourse created the notion of fighting to save religion from separatist heathens.

Thus, one finds in immediate post-war Pakistani discourse expressions of disbelief, bitterness, condemnation of opposition, and denial of responsibility. Here, it is also crucial to remember that the end of the war witnessed a shift of power in West Pakistan as well, with the mantle passing on from the military ruler Yahya Khan to the elected government of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. Although it was Yahya who was at the helm of the military action against Bengalis, Bhutto was also deeply invested in the West Pakistani war efforts, as his unwavering refusal to allow the democratically elected Awami League to form the Pakistani national government after the 1970 elections was one of the main grounds of the military conflict. Thus, the political transition in Pakistan after the war did not necessarily transform the official discursive realm regarding the war.

The official silence and selective amnesia around the nation's disintegration resulted in references to the war in Pakistani literature being meagre and often tangential in comparison to Bangladesh, where, even fifty years after 1971, the literary scene reverberates with echoes of the war. It is said, perhaps quite rightly, that every Bangladeshi writer of renown has produced at least one work inspired by the 1971 war.<sup>1</sup> A review of Pakistani fiction reveals an entirely dissimilar state of affairs: immediate literary responses to the 1971 war have been few and far apart in Pakistan. One is reminded of Mohammed Umar Memon's (1983) disappointment with the paucity of references to the war in Urdu fiction and his scathing reproval of Pakistani Urdu writers for their perceived indifference towards this momentous event in the history of the subcontinent: "the incident appears to have touched only a few; fewer

still are those for whom it has had any deep emotive significance at all, with ramifications in national morality” (106). The inadequacy of notable literature from Pakistan in response to the 1971 war becomes even more glaring in comparison to the rich oeuvre of literature in all forms—novels, short stories, and poetry—that has been inspired by the violence and displacement of the 1947 Partition.<sup>2</sup> It is only in recent years, largely after the turn of the century, that diasporic authors such as Moni Mohsin, Kamila Shamsie, and Sorayya Khan have engaged with the complexities of the war in Pakistani Anglophone literature.

Fig.1.1. shows the front page of *Dawn*, the oldest and biggest English newspaper in Pakistan, on December 17, 1971, the day after the unconditional surrender of the Pakistani army. The large, bold headline refers to Yahya Khan’s post-surrender address to the nation mentioned above. This misleading headline, which camouflages the Pakistani army’s defeat, is supported by two large advertisements at the bottom of the page seeking donations to the National Defence Fund in the name of *jehad*, a holy war to protect religion. This is reinforced by the reportage of China’s promised support for the West Pakistani cause. The biggest news of the day is presented in a brief article tucked away on the side with an indistinct heading: “Fighting ends in East Pakistan”. This equivocal title does not mention Pakistani Lieutenant-General A.A.K. Niazi’s signing of the Instrument of Surrender. Quite interestingly, *Dawn* published an article in 2017 in which it mentions the December 17, 1971 edition as one of the instances where the editors were not allowed to “unveil the truth” owing to the “policies of a powerful state” (Abbas 2017).



Fig. 1.1. Front page of *Dawn*, published from Karachi, Pakistan, on December 17, 1971

Along with Yahya Khan’s speech, this edition of *Dawn* provides a clue to how invested the masses might have been in the potential outcome of the war, suggests the anxious expectations of a nation, and demonstrates propaganda in glorious display. It is particularly interesting how the military action against East Pakistan is called a *jehad*, which serves to paint the East Pakistanis as religious ‘others’ even though Islam was the religion of the majority there. This is comparable to Yahya’s reference to the Pakistani soldiers as “Ghazis of Islam”, all of which point towards the Bengalis as “Hinduised Muslim” (Mookherjee 164) who now, collaborating with India, pose a threat to the nation of Pakistan and, more importantly, Islam itself, because the idea of Pakistan is engineered as the home for all South Asian Muslims. The visible incongruity between the surrender of the army and the seemingly enthusiastic spirit of the nation being announced in the headlines elucidates how national identity is engineered

through an appeal to the nation's fighting spirit and military posturing. But how is this national identity sustained after the end of hostilities? How is national identity refashioned once half of the nation-state's territory and population are amputated? The next two sections explore two distinctly different post-war literary engagements with the shock of defeat and the overwhelming blow to the national spirit after 1971.

**“All art is to some extent propaganda”: Literature as a disseminator of state ideology**

The meagre volume of Pakistani war writings in the immediate years after the war is understandable, considering that political and media propaganda actively created a misleading impression of the Pakistani army's chances of victory during the war. One wonders if Schivelbusch's observation regarding wars in Europe is relevant in the postcolonial Pakistani context as well: “nations are as incapable of imagining their own defeat as individuals are of conceiving their own death” (12). Perhaps it is the unsuspecting confidence in a definite victory, engineered through ambiguous wartime disinformation, that creates this post-war literary vacuum. However, although Pakistani fictional responses to the war have been sporadic, they have not been entirely absent. But one might say that most of the mainstream Pakistani representation of the war has, for the first few years after the war, been largely in keeping with the ideological strain followed by the state.

The selective vision of war-related truth is not limited to news reporting alone but also inevitably finds its place in art. False statements and suppression of truth in the news media during the war to dishearten the opposition and reinforce the determination of one's own side are understandable strategies. Readers are perhaps, to some extent, conscious of the possibility of propagandist information in the news media, especially if the situation is one like that of Pakistan in 1971, where the nation's army was fighting against a section of its own citizens.



What happens when propaganda is disseminated unsuspectingly through the esteemed medium of fiction? What does it reveal about the discursive realm of nationalism when a short story transmitting the statist version of a war is published two years after it is over?

“Ghar Āngan” (1973) by Parveen Sarwar, translated as “Hearth and Home,” serves as an apt entry point into discussions about the relationship between literature as a medium and the rigid structure of religious nationalist loyalties and state propaganda. As a short story infiltrated by state vocabulary and ideology, it offers the opportunity to probe the dynamics between imaginative fiction and the top-down approach of statist narrative and demonstrates how fiction plays an undeniable role in maintaining hostile inter-ethnic relations through the creation of the ‘other’. It offers a fascinating alternative explanation behind the outcome of the war, citing the treachery, guile, and misguidedness of ‘others’. It narrates the life story of a West Pakistani Punjabi girl, Shakira, who marries an East Pakistani Bengali, Shamsul, on her visit to Dhaka. Dedicated to the cause of a unified Pakistan, Shamsul believes that their inter-wing marriage can be their own little step towards culturally soldering the two wings of Pakistan. Although the protagonist dismisses the assumption that an individual can represent each wing of Pakistan, the story, as it progresses, reinforces that Shamsul and Shakira are representative characters.

The story is interesting in its use of popular stereotypes- Bengali Shamsul is presented as an emotional, impulsive, deceptive, and temperamental man who is quick to change sides and mispronounces words like “*mazic*” (166) and “*caze*” (Sarwar 173) in his heavy Bengali accent. The cleverness of the story lies in having the protagonist Shakira dismiss these stereotypes as such, just as the reader might be tempted to do. Thus, she pays no heed to her uncle’s displeasure at her proposed marriage when he says: “I know these Bengalis inside out, a lot better than you think you do” (173). It is quite interesting that her family “was peeved at

the thought of marrying a Bengali, as though she was about to renounce her religion” (174). This is in keeping with Mookherjee’s observations on West Pakistani stereotypes about Bengalis:

The west Pakistani army apparently saw these Kafers as small-boned, short (referred to as “pygmies” in the film *Guerrilla*), dark, lazy, effeminate, bheto (rice- and fish-eating and cowardly), half-Muslim Bengalis of the river plains, in contrast to themselves, supposedly broad-boned, tall, fair, wheat-eating, warrior-like, resilient, manly, brave Muslims of the rough topography of Pakistan. (164)

It is when the stock character Shamsul proves to be a stock character through his later actions that the discursive dominance of the conventional image is validated.

As the story proceeds, readers witness Punjabi Shakira adapting to Bengali ways and making compromises to please her husband and in-laws, even embracing the company of their Hindu neighbours and close family friends. Through her efforts to assimilate into the Bengali culture, she upholds the dream of Pakistan: “*Amar desh Pakistan, poschim Pakistan ar purbo Pakistan- dwiti bhag* (My country is Pakistan. West Pakistan and East Pakistan-both parts)” (179). Of further interest is that she voices this firm belief in Bengali, thereby underlining West Pakistan’s willingness to reach a middle ground. However, with rising political heat preceding the outbreak of the 1971 war, her husband, formerly a Pakistani nationalist, pledges his allegiance to the cause of Bangladesh. Domestic disputes arise over issues such as the language their child will speak—Bengali or Urdu. Even though Shakira agrees to have her child learn both Bengali and Urdu, her husband blatantly refuses to consent to that.

Shakira’s bewilderment at her husband’s transformation, illustrative of West Pakistan’s confusion at the Bengali ‘uprising’, is supported in the text through a complete omission of the reasons behind Shamsul’s change of mind. For instance, it is curious that Shamsul is presented as being exceptionally enthusiastic about Urdu in the pre-war period, seemingly unaffected by

the Language Movement of the 1950s, which makes his sudden transformation appear even more baffling.<sup>3</sup> Without any psychological depth to the character, his and therefore all Bengali actions appear inexplicable in the story. The transformation of Shakira's erstwhile pleasant mother-in-law is presented thus: "How she had changed! She'd glower at Shakira with such burning hostility as if she would suck the blood from her veins and leave her writhing in the slaughterhouse" (184). What is curious about this passage is that such a violent vampirical image is provided with no explanation, and readers are left wondering with horror like Shakira at the unaccountable metamorphosis of the old lady.

The final section of the story is set in Lahore, where Shakira and her husband Shamsul have moved in the face of an increasing threat to the lives of West Pakistanis in Dhaka. Still the "symbol of sacrifice and love" (184), "[o]ut of consideration for Shamsul, she did not allow her house to have a Punjabi air" (186). The figure of the accommodating Shakira emphasises the willingness of West Pakistan to strike a balance and make compromises, contrary to the alleged intransigency of the eastern wing. This image of West Pakistani moral superiority would understandably resonate with the conservative mainstream readership in the post-war demoralised Pakistani nation and help mobilise energies to restore the former glory of the Pakistani nation after the tragedy of 1971.

The success of the story as a disseminator of nationalist ideology lies in its skillful introduction of a second 'other'. In the final scene of the story, Shamsul's brother, Qamrul, arrives from East Pakistan, bearing woeful tidings about the cold-blooded murder of their Bengali Muslim family at the hands of double-crossing Hindu neighbours. Shakira and Shamsul's response to this news is revealing:

After a pause, Shakira spoke up, “You’ve got your Bangladesh after all. Its soil is dyed with your blood. Shout, ‘Long live Bangladesh!’ Now you’re a free citizen of an independent country.”

“Shakira! Shakira Begum!” Shamsul pleaded. “We didn’t want this sort of freedom.”

“Now there will be a Hindu Raj and all you Bengalis will be slaves of the Hindus. Say it! Long live Bangladesh! Say it! Say it! Long live Bangladesh!” (190-191)

The bitter sarcasm of the otherwise deferential Shakira is significant as she finds her voice when her earlier suspicions about the Hindu neighbours are validated through their actions. This fascinating passage serves several purposes in terms of re-engineering and consolidating a new national identity after the disintegration of Pakistan. Firstly, her derision and mockery capture many of the emotional and political trends in mainstream Pakistani narrative: disregard for the validity of the demands made by Bengalis, lack of sympathy for the Bengali cause, and often looking upon the demand for political justice as an obstinate rebellion and an utter refusal to compromise by ‘misguided’ Bengalis marionetted by diabolical Indians. Secondly, it serves to rationalise the standpoint of Pakistan by presenting a gruesome fate for misled Bengalis; separation seems to have resulted in disaster for them. Finally, the presentation of Bengali Muslim ‘others’ being victimised by Hindu ‘others’ serves to create a certain categorization among ‘others’, wherein the former is also deceived by the latter. The fact that Hindu interference seems to be the fundamental cause of trouble is important because it defends the initial dream of Pakistan, which imagined the unity of two geographically separated regions based on religious uniformity.

The story’s support of the protagonist’s claim that the minority Hindu population in Bangladesh murdered their Bengali Muslim brethren and took over control of the new nation is intriguing: “The Hindu merchant happily danced on piles of skulls” (185). It is interesting that the narrative does not provide a logical justification for Hindu minorities attacking Muslim neighbours when both groups support the same cause of a free Bangladesh. It appears that no

rational explanation is expected by readers, who are assumed to be only too willing to presuppose the villainy ingrained in Hindu characters. In South Asia, it is commonplace to associate a nation-state's religious minorities with antagonistic neighbours. The perceived threat to the nation by religious minorities is a common discourse in South Asia, which serves to unite the majority in fanatical nationalism. "Hearth and Home" is also remarkable in its suppression of information about the extent of persecution faced by religious minorities at the hands of the Pakistani army. This is also a habitual practise in the often intolerant and chauvinistic version of nationalism observable across South Asia.

"Hearth and Home", although not much to speak of in terms of its literary merit, offers a fascinating insight into popular Pakistani discourse on the events of 1971 in the immediate aftermath of the war.<sup>4</sup> It opens questions about the response of ordinary citizens of West Pakistan towards the bloodbath in the east and how much of it was engineered by military control and stringent censorship over media reports. It also offers a fascinating perspective on the role played by Hindu minorities and India in the war, strikingly different from the representations in Bangladeshi war fiction. In Bangladesh, the war is a people's war, a war of liberation that brought ordinary citizens together in guerrilla warfare, a war in which untrained civilians made a defensive stand against the invading enemy forces, albeit with the assistance of ally forces from India. The victory in the war is brought about by 'sons of the soil', with external allies providing reinforcement and support.<sup>5</sup> However, in much of the early Pakistani fiction and state-controlled media, the war appears to be one chiefly involving India and Pakistan, in which East Pakistanis are little more than pawns in the hands of Indian puppeteers. One wonders whether a story such as "Hearth and Home" was perhaps a strategy for coping with the agony of defeat, intended to reassure Pakistani civilians that its recent military venture was justifiable and righteous. Amidst the competing ideological apparatuses of the two nations,

in which Bangladeshi discourse was vociferous about its stance in the immediate aftermath of 1971, rival ideologies perhaps necessitated an absolute denial of the other position, which created an environment and readership for texts such as “Hearth and Home”.

**“From even the greatest of horrors, irony is seldom absent”: Literature as resistance to state ideology**

Just as stereotypes of ‘others’ abound in stories such as “Hearth and Home”, they may also be observed in early post-war Pakistani fiction, which was resistant to the statist discourse. It is indeed quite fascinating to note the modification of stock characters and clichéd cultural assumptions in fictional works that offer opposition to fiction like “Hearth and Home”. Similar characters that adhere to the prevalent ‘racial model’ in West Pakistan may be found in such writings, but they are recast through a distinctly different ideological lens. Here, Pakistani journalist Anthony Mascarenhas’ observation about the difference between the two wings is worth consideration: “In West Pakistan, nature has fostered energetic, aggressive people—hardy hill men and tribal farmers who have constantly strived for a livelihood in relatively harsh conditions. They are a world apart from the gentle, dignified Bengalis who are accustomed to the easy abundance of their delta homeland in the east” (10).<sup>7</sup>

The cultural environment of censorship in post-war Pakistan is also worth remembering. How do creative writers engage with the rhetoric of propaganda and produce nonconformist works of art in a cultural environment of stringent censorship? Does the literary form allow for possible leeway to express a difference of opinion that the news media might not have? How might this counter the kind of nationalism propagated by statist discourse and engineer national identity in a different way?

If the stereotype of Pakistani soldiers in Bangladesh is one of inhuman, heartless automatons, the formulaic representation of Bengali soldiers in Pakistani mainstream discourse would be one of weakness and treachery, with the guerrillas understood as being little more than mindless, bloodthirsty hooligans.<sup>6</sup> Here, one is reminded of Younus Javed's *Kaanch ka Pul* (1974), in which Bengali nationalists trick an uncomplicated West Pakistani man, who is disinterested in politics, into saying 'Long Live Pakistan', only to create an excuse for riddling him with bullets. This presents the popular image of the quintessential Bengali, weak in combat and thus predisposed to guile. At first glance, it might appear that Tariq Rahman's English short story "Bingo", first published in *The Legacy* (1973), joins forces, vociferously and enthusiastically, with this school of thought. However, a careful consideration reveals that the story presents Bengali stereotypes but only to debunk them; it is instead a brilliant use of irony to offer an oppositional perspective, and a discerning reader can easily identify the ironic descriptions for what they are.

The title 'Bingo' refers to a pejorative term for Bengalis popular in West Pakistan, a term that the narrator, Safeer, freely uses to refer to all Bengalis and especially his roommate in the Pakistani Military Academy, Tajassur.<sup>7</sup> Readers are introduced to Tajassur through Safeer's perspective as a stereotypical Bengali: lazy, effeminate, inefficient, and, all things considered, entirely unsuited for the sacred martial profession. A few excerpts from the story merit quotation in this context:

The seniors called him a sissy and said he was fit to be a heroine in a Filipino movie. He often had one or two sadistic senior slave-drivers who delighted in punishing him or feeding him on sweets in the canteen. (153)

[...] he was liked by our immature platoon-mates and they thought he was a good sort. He had given his water-bottle to thirsty people who had been foolish enough to have wasted their supply in the exercise [...] He had a smile for most of us and, in the Academy, chaps are nit-wits enough to get impressed by these kind of trivialities. (154)

Tajassur had got many badges of rank, cap and stuff even from JUNIORS. I thought it a shame to accept things from juniors and said so. He smiled sheepishly and told me that presents could not be refused. (154)

These descriptive passages stand out in their abundance and the explicitness of narratorial manipulation, which might facilitate the detection of the unreliability of the narratorial voice. As the narrator mocks Tajassur as a “fool” and “a subhuman creature”, readers might wonder if the narrator is not like the “sadistic slave-drivers” in his derision of his roommate and his essentialist notions of martial masculinity. His inability to interpret situations correctly, for instance, by identifying Tajassur’s kindness as such, accentuates the reader’s suspicion of his reliability to accurately interpret the incidents that form the rest of the story, namely, the war of 1971. Through the narrator’s steadfast belief in stereotypes about Bengalis, the story establishes him as a personification of a certain ideological bent. Readers familiar with the aesthetics of irony may easily identify the bitter satire in the presentation of the narrator and become sceptical about his attempt at otherization.

The narrator intends to present himself as the very opposite of what Tajassur embodies—an ideal military asset to the Pakistani nation—drawing upon the notion of the martial West Pakistanis in contrast to the effeminate Bengalis. However, whether he intends it or not, he does indeed succeed in coming across as an automaton replicating essentialist notions of nationhood, manliness, and unconcealed and unapologetic ethnocentrism:

He was a Bingo, you see. He belonged to Dacca itself and East Pakistan had begun kicking up one hell of a row to get separated from West Pakistan. We called him a “Bingo” and a “traitor” and Sheikh Mujibur Rahman’s ADC. I went a step further and called him “Marshland minion”. I told him, he would be the minion of old Mujib and since all his land was marshland so—the title! (154)

The narrator’s willing acceptance of jingoistic stereotypes is in sharp contrast to “Hearth and Home,” where, on the contrary, the protagonist initially resisted clichéd racial notions about Bengalis. However, the plot of the rest of the story went on to prove her family’s bias to be



true and expose her naivety. The irony in “Bingo” works differently: here the narrator is initially the epitome of ethnocentric nationalism, but the plot goes on to demonstrate the fallibility of his prejudices.

The mental landscape of the narrator reveals a fascinating picture of the nationalist military mindset at the personal and institutional levels—deference and loyalty, indoctrination, and nationalism. Whereas Tajassur deserts the Pakistani army to join the Bengali forces, the narrator is only too willing to go and “roast” the “rebel Bingo troops” citing reasons such as: “Since January Sheikh Mujeeb had become even more absurdly adamant about his “SIX POINTS”. I never knew what the damned six points were but anything coming from a loony like Mujeeb must have been crap” (157); “Because they are Pakistan’s enemies. Because they want to divide our country. Because they are Indian agents and anti-Pakistan. That’s what we are being paid for” (158). What one may sense here are traces of ethnocentrism, economic self-interest, distrust of civilians, and anxiety over foreign interference, thus revealing a sense of vulnerability and, consequently, the need to assert control and maintain ‘unity’. The narrator’s lack of knowledge about the ‘others’, his apathy towards acquiring the requisite understanding, and his contemptuous dismissal of Mujib’s Six Points as “crap” from a “loony” are also quite meaningful in this context.<sup>9</sup> Readers encounter the narrator’s indifference and, one may even say, abhorrence towards the army deserter Tajassur and Bengalis as a race:

We would shoot them slowly one by one. It improved my target practice a good deal. The bastards cried for pity and whimpered like dogs. I think this is a race of slaves. They look up at a person as if he were a god and then they are so treacherous that they stab you in the back. We used to kill them whenever we got news that our brethren had been killed anywhere. It didn’t compensate for our losses, but it made one take out one’s anger at someone. Some officers delighted in torturing the Bingos to extract information from them. In the beginning I thought it was excessive but soon enough I found out that these stubborn people didn’t talk as long as you treated them humanely. Besides, everything is fair once your national integrity is at stake. (159)

After a point, his uninhibited dismissal of Bengali deaths, emphasised through the use of animal imagery, goes beyond inadvertent racism and begins to sound like a justification for mass atrocities against civilians. The unrestrained dehumanisation in his narrative makes the cautious reader wary about the fallibility of the narrator and in turn, his brand of nationalist propaganda. Clearly, in the narratorial perspective, the Bengalis, represented as “dogs” and “slaves”, are very different from their West Pakistani “brethren”. Passages like these cannot help but remind one of Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*. The gleeful presentation of such brutal images may sound similar to the colonial violence in Conrad’s text. The narrator, like Marlow, seems to have imbibed the prejudices of his social position, and his apologies for the army’s actions also sound like his. In a manner similar to Marlow, the ‘others’ appear as mere objects to the narrator. The homicidal megalomania of this passage is eerily close to Kurtz’s unadulterated malignance. In a post-war emotionally charged environment, even if readers might have associated with some prejudiced views of the narrator at the beginning of the story, this passage, in its irresponsible brutality and open malevolence, removes all possibilities of identification with him.

It is in the short final section of the story that a rethinking of national identity is initiated through the figure of the narrator. Here one witnesses the narrator’s moral discovery, foregrounded through the contrast between the narrator’s generalised preconceptions about Bengalis and his actual experience. Tajassur’s sensitivity, which he mocked throughout the story, is what saves him from execution. Now a member of the Mukti Bahini, Tajassur risks his own life to free the narrator from captivity and shelter him in his own home. The narrator’s dehumanised representation of Bengalis now undergoes a major shift as he begins to acknowledge the human ties and the kinship that exist between them:

I lived there for three days and that soft-spoken family wafted me to states of mind I had never known before. A languorous peace filled me as I drank milk and ate my rice. Tajassur's sister Amina had a charming langour in her eyes which made me eat my rice ever so softly. There was no hurry, no protocol and no friction. They had soft, cute, childlike smiles. They spoke a bit of Urdu, and Amina knew a little English too. There was a warmth in their house which made me melt. It was lovely. (163)

This brief description of Bengali kindness jeopardises the stereotypes established in the cultural imaginary. The unchecked dehumanisation of Bengalis in the rest of the story comes to a halt with the representation of homely hospitality by Tajassur's family and an acknowledgement of human commonality. This episode not only records the "melting" of the narrator, who formerly represented an extreme form of nationalism, but also presents a new way of fashioning one's identity based on compassion, kindness, and humanity instead of nationalist rhetoric. The portrayal of Bengali characters, in the form of Tajassur and his family, as inherently more humane than any of the West Pakistanis in the story also serves to reconstruct the image of the 'other'. In a manner reminiscent of Mascarenhas' observation mentioned above, this comes across as an 'inverted version' of the Bengali and Pakistani stereotypes in which the Bengali moral superiority is foregrounded.

The story, as it heads towards its conclusion, moves farther away from the initial narratorial rhetoric of justifying Pakistani army actions. The final scene of the story narrates a Pakistani army raid on Tajassur's house, a raid that results in Tajassur being bayoneted to death, his sister being raped and killed, and the narrator being 'rescued' from Bengalis. The narrator's actions and physical reactions in the aftermath of this are quite telling:

And Tajassur's mother was wild. She tore her hair. She flung things all around. She was frantic. I couldn't meet her eyes. I couldn't stand her grief. She was living in the agony of death. Her husband had died much earlier. I took the Captain's sten-gun and shot her—to end her agony with pity in my heart. She looked at me as if unable to believe the depth of human ingratitude. (163)

Empathy and pity have taken the narrator's place of former indifference. No longer looking upon Bengalis as 'vermin' to practise target-shooting upon, the narrator betrays an unconscious respect for them instead. Similar to Marlow's experience in Congo, it seems that the narrator's sojourn in East Pakistan has been transformative. It is only a half-hearted attempt to conceal the sympathetic attachment that the narrator has developed with the Bengali cause, as the story ends on an apparently matter-of-fact note: "Nothing mattered anymore. Tajassur and his mother were no longer alive to accuse me. Bangla Desh was free, and the Pakistan Army had surrendered" (164). Instead, readers can sense his implicit hostility to the Pakistani army he was once so loyal to and his newfound realisation of essential humanity. Tajassur's mother is certainly not the first Bengali the narrator has killed. However, the evident contrast between his previous gleeful slaughter of Bengalis for "target practice" (159) and his mercy killing of Tajassur's mother demonstrates the shift in narratorial ideology.

Although the story ends on a pessimistic note, the acknowledgement of the 'freedom of Bangladesh' as such instead of referring to it as 'secession by East Pakistan' also serves as a hint of moral redemption for the narrator. "Hearth and Home" ends with a similar declaration of the independence of Bangladesh, but there, readers find the previously submissive Shakira sneering at her husband's folly in having trusted his Hindu neighbours and mistakenly supporting the cause of liberation. The conclusion of "Bingo" reveals a very different side of the 'culture of defeat'. Here, one finds the previously prejudiced narrator acknowledging the independence of Bangladesh and questioning his own erstwhile stance. Although a major part of the story portrays the narrator's unswerving faith in shared xenophobic stereotypes and his belief in violent repression as a justified solution to subdue alternate forms of nationalism, by the end, "Bingo" comes across as a biting satire of Pakistani army actions propped up by a certain brand of exclusionary nationalism. Here, one finds an invitation to reassess one's

collective responsibility for violence in the name of the nation, an acknowledgment of defeat without citing reasons such as treachery, and an encouragement to draw difficult lessons from history in order to refashion a new Pakistani national identity after the independence of Bangladesh. The difference in the plot structure of the two stories attests to the contrasting ideological impetus behind them and the different processes of subjective identity formation that they both represent.

### **Conclusion**

A study of immediate post-war Pakistani fiction reveals the coexistence of multifaceted discourse and competing ideologies after the disintegration of the nation-state. The two stories studied in this paper represent two different positions on the spectrum of nationalist discourse in Pakistan. While Parveen Sarwar's "Hearth and Home" actively contributes to the process of engineering a national identity, strictly adhering to the nationalist narrative of the war and denying accountability for widespread violence, Tariq Rahman's "Bingo" offers a competing narrative that deflates the monolithic construct of the nation through official ideology pivoted on otherization.

It is curious that both narratives engage, albeit in distinctly different ways, with the racial stereotype of Bengalis. Whereas a message of West Pakistani superiority resonates through the reiteration of these stereotypes in one, the nonconformist representation in the other employs conventional images in ingenious ways to critique the state. "Hearth and Home" is framed through the perspective of a naïve female protagonist who undergoes a shift in her mindset as she recognises Bengali 'others' to be as dreadful and appalling as stereotypes had warned they would be. On the contrary, identical stereotypes can be found in "Bingo" as well, but they are presented only to be deflated at the end of the story, and an inverted version of the

stereotype is upheld in the form of the aggressive Pakistani and the gentle Bengali. The way in which the ‘other’ is constructed in each case shapes the construction of the nation. The authorial investment in the construction and reconstruction of Bengali ‘others’ in both stories attests to the potential of these discourses to threaten or preserve prevailing literary and political models. The fact that both stories were published in 1973 shows that these alternative visions of the nation do not exist independently but are rather formed in the shadow and threat of other possible perspectives in the existing political climate.

Additionally, the two short stories discussed in this article shed light on the post-war literary market in Pakistan. A story such as Sarwar’s, which is a realist melodrama blended with a dose of propaganda, would be palatable and welcome to a demoralised population. One wonders if such fiction catered to the ostensible self-deception of Pakistani state policy and if it nurtured self-serving illusions that made history more palatable for Pakistani readers. On the other hand, “Bingo” offers a fascinating instance of satire and irony as a literary strategy to distance oneself from the statist historiography. This stands as testimony to the possibility of an aesthetic articulation of a nonconformist ideological code comprising critical responses, ironies, and satires. Here, the question of accessibility becomes crucial: whereas Sarwar writes originally in Urdu, catering to a wider readership, Ahmed’s story is written in English, a language whose reach is far more limited.

It is a promising development that recent fiction of Pakistani origin has, to a large extent, moved away from cultural stereotypes and black-and-white binaries. Instead of any attempt at typecasting, novels such as Kamila Shamsie’s *Kartography* (2001) and Sorayya Khan’s *Noor* (2003) present thoughtful and nuanced characters with psychological depth, irrespective of their political outlook and racial, linguistic, and religious identity. However, it is noteworthy that almost all of these recent works were published abroad by expatriate authors

who write in English. Nevertheless, they form part of a small but significant body of work that resists the statist engineering of the nation through literature.

### Notes

1. Bangladeshi literary and political discourse abounds in references to the 1971 war. A study of Bangladeshi war writings also demonstrates literature taking the form of political advocacy, albeit in a different form compared to Pakistan. It is fascinating how references to the war are commonplace in Bangladeshi elections even today.
2. This offers an interesting parallel to the dearth of references to the 1947 Partition in Bangladeshi literature, which instead is preoccupied with the 1952 Language Movement and the 1971 war as the key events in the last century.
3. Protests against the imposition of Urdu as the official language have been raging since 1948 in the predominantly Bengali-speaking East Pakistan. The movement reached its climax when a student protest in Dhaka resulted in police action and resultant deaths on February 21, 1952.
4. Khushwant Singh's review of the story is of note here: "Sarwar's characters are not living human beings but lifeless puppets mouthing words assigned to them by her. I have yet to read an author, Indian or Pakistani, who has treated as sensitive a theme as the division of the country in so insensitive a manner as Sarwar".
5. Interestingly, it is the title of a Bengali short story on the war by Kayes Ahmed (1987), which includes gruesome descriptions of the interrogation and torture of guerrillas and other suspects at the hands of the Pakistani army.
6. Many Bengali novels, such as Shaukat Osman's *Nīl Damśan* (1981), translated as *Blue Venom* (2017), present such stereotypical Pakistani characters.

7. Nayanika Mookherjee argues that Mascarenhas' observation is an "inverted version" of the mainstream otherizing discourse (164).
8. The plot of Kamila Shamsie's *Kartography* (2002) revolves largely around the use of this term during and after the 1971 war. The young protagonist of the novel, in the Karachi of the 1990s, learns to her horror that her father, whom she had idealised as a liberal man all her life, had broken off his engagement during the 1971 war with his fiancé because she was a "Bingo".
9. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's Six Points Movement was based on a set of demands that were aimed at reducing the discrimination against East Pakistan.

### Works cited

- Abbas, Zaffar. "The missing pages of history: 70 years of Pakistan and Dawn", *Dawn*, 19 August 2017, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1352579/the-missing-pages-of-history-70-years-of-pakistan-and-dawn>. Accessed 12 February 2023.
- Conrad, Joseph. *Heart of Darkness*. Cambridge University Press, 2018.
- Javed, Younus. *Kaanch Ka Pul*, Universal Books, 1987.
- Khan, Sorayya. *Noor*. Penguin, 2003.
- Mascarenhas, Anthony. *The Rape of Bangladesh*. Vikas Publications, 1971.
- Memon, Mohammad Umar. "Pakistani Urdu Creative Writing on National Disintegration: The Case of Bangladesh". *The Journal of Asian Studies* vol 43, no 1, 1983, pp. 105-127.
- Mookherjee, Nayanika. *Spectral Wound: Sexual Violence, Public Memories, and the Bangladesh War of 1971*. Duke University Press, 2015.
- Osman, Shaukat. *Blue Venom and Forbidden Incense: Two Novellas*, translated by Arunava Sinha and Saugata Ghosh. Seagull Books, 2017.
- Rahman, Tariq. "Bingo". *Fault Lines: Stories of 1971*, edited by Niaz Zaman and Asif Farrukhi, University Press, 2008.
- Sarwar, Parveen. "Hearth and Home". *Fear and Desire: An Anthology of Urdu Stories*, edited by Muhammad Umar Memon, Oxford University Press, 1994, pp. 165-191.
- Schivelbusch, Wolfgang. *The Culture of Defeat: On National Trauma, Mourning, and Recovery*. Translated by Jefferson Chase. Granta, 2003.



Shamsie, Kamila. *Kartography*. Bloomsbury, 2003.

“Text of Yahya’s Address to the Nation”. *New York Times*, December 17, 1971, p. 17.  
[nytimes.com/1971/12/17/archives/text-of-yahyas-address-to-the-nation.html](https://www.nytimes.com/1971/12/17/archives/text-of-yahyas-address-to-the-nation.html).  
Accessed 12 February 2023.

Thomas, Dominic. *Nation-building, Propaganda, and Literature in Francophone Africa*.  
Indiana University Press, 2002.