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Identity, Memory, and Transitional Justice: The Literary Representation of Biharis in *Of Martyrs and Marigolds* and *Invisible Lines*

Md Firoz Mahmud Ahsan
The University of Hong Kong

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Md Firoz Mahmud Ahsan

Md Firoz Mahmud Ahsan is a PhD student at the School of English in The University of Hong Kong. His main interest lies in tracing the travails of the decolonizing trauma theory in South Asian literature. He also takes interest in a wide spectrum of issues related to literature, history, politics and philosophy, and their varied and critical interrelationships; e-mail: firoz@hku.hk

Abstract

My paper investigates how the identity of the self pitted against the violence of war may enable an individual to represent a community via a sort of creative deployment of transitional justice made possible in the liminal space of literature. Such restorative measures by means of literary acknowledgement may prove effective in regard to bringing to notice the suppression of wrongdoing. In the prominent nationalistic narratives of Bangladesh, the Urdu-speaking migrant Muslims known as muhajirs are predominantly shown as collaborators of the Pakistan army. These narratives portray them as traitors and denominate them as Biharis, although many came from various places outside Bihar. The perpetration of Biharis by Bengalis in the wake of the war and after independence is a highly controversial and sensitive issue in today's Bangladesh. This paper critically appreciates the saddening tale of Biharis (the stranded Pakistanis in Bangladesh) as mirrored in the novels *Of Martyrs and Marigolds* (2012) by Aquila Ismail and *Invisible Lines* by Ruby Zaman (2011).

Keywords

Biharis, identity, traumatic memory, transitional justice, perpetration, immunity paradigm, etc.

Who Are Biharis in Bangladesh

In this paper, it is not my intention to chronicle, represent, or sympathize with the still-unresolved case of Biharis, who otherwise are known as the stranded Pakistanis in Bangladesh. Instead, what I aim to accomplish by critically examining the select works of fiction—*Of Martyrs and Marigolds* (2012) by Aquila Ismail and *Invisible Lines* (2011) by Ruby Zaman—resting on the plight of these people is to gauge 1) how the postconflict hauntings transform memory and trauma; 2) why and how a country in transition such as Bangladesh, which “attempt[s] to rebuild political structures and shape[s] social relationships in the hope of creating more peaceful futures,” (Wale et al. 1) overshadows minority groups like the stranded Pakistanis even though the stranded Pakistanis are the Muslim coreligionists of the

the majority Bangladeshis, rejects them effective statehood, and thereby denies them civil rights, and finally vitiates the legitimacy of their collective trauma; 3) and to which extent fiction can prove its worth as a riposte to such manipulation and can thus offer a creative outlet if not a solution by acting as a measure of transitional justice.

The two novels featuring the cultural trauma of Biharis begin with the preconceived notion of a community. Both the novels give a clear and detailed exposition of their position in relation to the collateral damage incurred on Biharis—their loss of a community and the shattering of their dream of a homeland. The trajectory of their conversion caused by the sociopolitical vicissitudes may be traced as follows: a) in the newly formed Pakistan, they existed as a people who enjoyed every citizen right after the partition of India in 1947. In the wake of the partition, they migrated to Pakistan—a sacred land for Indian Muslims. Albeit displaced from the homes of their ancestors, they were ready to endure the looming suffering. The pipe dream of a geographical location for an imagined community of Muslims injected them with the hopes for a better tomorrow; b) their arrival in both wings of Pakistan—East and West—affects the host communities in diverse ways. Consequently, the treatment they receive in a foreign culture is overtly variegated:

[In East Pakistan or present-day Bangladesh] Bengali-speaking Muslims from West Bengal merged into local communities with relative ease in the newly formed East Pakistan. Many already had relatives and socio-linguistic ties to East Bengal. Anxieties over assimilation or acceptance in a new homeland do not appear to have been serious considerations for Bengalis. At the same time, most of the Urdu-speaking educated upper and middle classes who had sought refuge in East Pakistan moved to West Pakistan, which afforded better economic and social prospects for those with social capital and connections. Non-Bengali Muslims who stayed on in East Pakistan tended to be refugees with little formal education and even less in the way of capital and connections. (Siddiqi 165)

c) the remaining non-Bengali Muslims, who came from different parts of India to East Pakistan, coexisted relatively peacefully with the hosts. The word hosts is a little problematic with respect to Pakistani Muslims because in the promised homeland of Pakistan, every Muslim citizen supposedly always already belonged to the land no matter whether they were

indigenous to it or migrated there. They were assured a secure life up until 1971 when the civil war between the two wings of Pakistan broke out. Their sense of elation quickly withered away as their Bengali coreligionists condemned them for collaborating with the Pakistani military. They exacted vengeance on Biharis in the same way the military had cracked down on them. Thus, in the wake of the Bangladesh War, Biharis became socially disintegrated and were forced by Bengalis to become a mere multitude divested of human rights. Along this line of argument, the two primary female protagonists of the two novels do not essentially feature any individual trauma. One can metaphorically read their trauma as the trauma of their community in that they represent their community all along and work through their trauma to regain the lost esteem of their community. Both the novels showcase the suppressed plight of an absented community.

As Beatriz Pérez Zapata argues, “[T]he study of individual and cultural, collective traumas cannot be conceived separately, especially so in postcolonial contexts, which should closely examine the social and political components of trauma” (6). She further argues that:

reinterpretations and new ways of approaching colonial and postcolonial processes . . . transcend the borders of old colonial territories to include the issues of migration, exile, diaspora, as well as the acute suffering caused by otherness and a generalized sense of unbelonging in a postcolonial world. The combination of trauma studies and postcolonialism can be quite productive if it emerges from an ethical stance that considers all the members and circumstances involved both historically and culturally. (12)

The recurring dislocation of the non-Bengali Urdu speakers in 1947 followed by 1971 should be more than enough to “lead [them] to suffering of clinical proportions” (Hron 284). A politically situated reading of the suffering of the lost community of Biharis warrants an ethical concern because any reading devoid of such apprehension may totalize perspectives (Zapata 1). Biharis are not by definition refugees, but they bear the trauma that migrants experience. Hence, their trauma is more intricate than usual. A situated analysis in the fashion of postcolonial trauma that “entails a constant renegotiation and redefinition of what constitutes a traumatic experience” (Zapata 1) may effect a better understanding of a community mostly invisible. Before delving deeper into the intricacies of aspectual properties of their cultural trauma, I will address the word Biharis and shed some light on its origin.

The term *Biharis* is a misnomer in that under this all-inclusive hypernym, diverse groups of people coming from various regions of India have been appropriated as a single race by the Bengalis of the then East Pakistan or present-day Bangladesh. In the wake of the partition of India in 1947, these groups migrated from India and headed towards either West Pakistan or East Pakistan. The impetus for this great exodus came from, among other causes, a dream of a homeland for Muslims who considered themselves discriminated against by Hindus who were the majority in India. They were long persecuted by their colonial overlords and were allegedly put at a disadvantage by their compatriot Hindus too. Their cherished dream to have a land of their own after the fall of colonial rule drove them this far. Of course, not everyone willingly left their ancestral homes; many of them were threatened with eviction, or worse, ousted by force. Triggered by the religious divide, for fear of their lives, and for reasons unknown, they set out on a perilous journey to settle in a land yet foreign to them. The trauma of partition had not yet faded away from their minds, but they had to hit the road again in not more than twenty-four years when Bengalis indiscriminately accused them with the charge of betrayal and confederacy and in a retaliatory action wreaked havoc on them and forced them en bloc to take shelter in the enclave:

In the immediate aftermath of the war thousands were rounded up by virtue of their ethnicity and arrested as collaborators. Bihari homes and property were looted and destroyed. Sporadic clashes in Dhaka gave way to the premeditated killing of non-Bengalis in makeshift camps at Saidpur and Khalishpur, Khulna, although the large-scale massacre predicted by many outside observers did not occur. (Siddiqi 163-164)

The 1971 civil war fought between the two wings of Pakistan—East and West—witnessed the birth of a new country—Bangladesh. The birth of Bangladesh on the surface was a well-deserved though Pyrrhic victory for secular Bengali nationalism, but it concurrently shattered the dream of a promised land for Muslims much like that of the European Jews:

Muslim nationalism is rooted in the concept of Islamic civilization. A nation is equated with a community of the faithful, with a “consensus” of faith irrespective of geographical location or spatial boundaries. In the traditional Islamic view, states are multiracial, where communities co-exist and enjoy autonomous nationhood. Pakistan was a modification of this concept in so far as it had a geographical formation. (Murshid 185)

The secession of Pakistan was a heavy blow to the concept of global Islam as propounded by the visionaries of Pakistan demanding partition. The dream of rebuilding a new Islamic Khilafat (empire) initiated with the Pakistan project met with frustration, while the basic principle of partition proved futile if not invalid.

The label *Biharis* then is an oversimplification or overgeneralization deviously contrived and disparagingly used by Bengalis to separate out the strangers, to consciously other the racially different newcomers. Nevertheless, I will use the label throughout the paper for its extensive familiarity. With regard to the migration of Indian Muslims, not everyone in the Bihari population in postwar Bangladesh was fortunate enough to be repatriated to Pakistan. In actual fact, the majority had to stay back on a soil they had claimed as their own since partition but now was made foreign again as soon as their dreamed Pakistan had left them behind. Before they knew it, they became stateless in their own land. If Bangladeshis have their prerogative to represent their collective trauma, the hapless stranded Pakistanis whose trauma is twofold—they had already borne the legacy of the partition trauma, and now with the birth of Bangladesh, their trauma of statelessness and the offensive launched on them during and in the aftermath of the Bangladesh War joined up with the partition trauma—solicits recognition. As Jeffrey C. Alexander argues, “The relative *independence* of collective trauma narration from individual experience and historical event, the intervening agency of culture creators, the *performative impact* of textual enactment—these social facts explain why and how trauma-dramas have such extraordinarily powerful effects on the organization and structure of our social worlds” (5, my emphasis). To enable a community of people to culturally recognize their trauma, the terms in italics play a vital role. Although these social factors effectuate no practical result in the case of Biharis, their trauma begs attention. But unlike Bangladeshis, they are not privy to it in reality. What else makes the trauma of Biharis justly stand out?

The Cultural Trauma of the Stranded Pakistanis in Bangladesh

What makes trauma, which is characteristically as well as clinically individual, emerge at the level of collectivity, as Jeffrey C. Alexander suggests, is the cultural turn of the pain shared by a people (Trauma: A Social Theory 15). In other words, any individual trauma, i.e., war trauma, can become intersubjective only when a multitude of individual persons senses the acuteness and discomfort of such experience and identifies it collectively as a determinant

of their social identity. Hence, the difference between individual trauma and collective trauma hinges principally on how the affective core of trauma is transmuted into a cultural phenomenon. While trauma haunts an individual psychosomatically as she suffers the pain and relives the experience when gripped by its memory, collective actors do not indeed experience the pain, rather “decide’ to represent social pain as a fundamental threat to their sense of who they are, where they came from, and where they want to go” (Alexander, *Trauma: A Social Theory* 15). Whereas silence and unspeakability mark individual trauma, representation manifests cultural trauma. But what happens to a section of collective actors who bear as well as share the burden of a major catastrophe, but are not in any position to imagine and socially recognize the event?

Collective traumas “reflect[ing] of neither individual suffering nor actual events, but “symbolic renderings that reconstruct and imagine them” (Alexander, *Trauma: A Social Theory* 4) warrant representation, and if it so happens that the said section of people is stripped of their right to representation, does it imply that they practically are divested of collective trauma and thereupon cannot arrogate to themselves the right to its representation? The situation becomes more critical when the state, which itself in the past went into the throes of trauma, imposes such limitations. Does it provoke inference that i. the state acting as the sovereign and seemingly preoccupied with an urge for removal and erasure of their collective trauma in effect profanes their existence as a community and ii. by way of putting a proposition to incorporate them into the mainstream Bengali nationality actually expel them “in a paradoxical logic of protection through exposure?” (Mills 89) These questions require a further investigation into Bengali nationalism as it extends its felicitations to the collective trauma that sutures it and functions as an agentic apparatus of biopower. By the same token, Jeffrey C. Alexander reminds us that “social groups can, and often do, refuse to recognize the existence of others’ trauma, or place the responsibility for it on people other than themselves. Because of their failure they cannot achieve a moral stance. Refusing to participate in the process of trauma creation, social groups restrict solidarity, leaving others to suffer alone” (*Trauma: A Social Theory* 6). Put differently, refusing is equally crucial in not identifying, placing the blame on others, or simply bypassing others’ trauma.

The rejection of the cultural trauma of a social group by another, I would argue, depends on the breach between traumatic events and traumatized societies. According to Todd Madigan, these two quite self-explanatory terms precisely devolve on “how the analyst interprets the

significant revision, re-remembering and reconstruction of collective identity” (50). They remain indistinguishable in terms of explanation up to the point of “decision”. In other words, they both look upon cultural trauma as a “sociological process that defines a painful injury to the collectivity, establishes the victim, attributes responsibility, and distributes the ideal and material consequences” (Alexander, *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity* 22). However, once that is agreed, what causes the fundamental breach is:

th[e] crucial interpretation that will determine which path one follows. If one is content to allow this *significant revision, rere remembering* and reconstruction of collective identity to mean simply that the event becomes a more-or-less permanent part of a society’s collective memory, then one will have settled on the theory of *traumatic* events. However, if one chooses a stronger interpretation of this response, one will have adopted the theory of *traumatized societies*. (Madigan 50, italics in the original)

As for Biharis, the entire community has passively and collectively recognized the torment inflicted on them as the instance of their cultural trauma, but to make it known and widespread depends largely on the “stronger interpretation” of such recognition. Unfortunately, such interpretation comes from Bengalis’ end, who overshadow their (Biharis’) trauma and assert their own over others. In the process, they emerge as a governing majority whose narratives of trauma get an upper hand in the chronicle of history. They racially segregate Biharis and reject their account on the ground of prevarication and denounce their plight as being nonexistent and unprincipled because it (the cause of their plight), in Volker Heins and Andreas Langenohl’s words, indeed is not an “identity-changing event” (qtd. in Madigan 50). If recognition or assertion marks *traumatic events*, it occurs internally and passively in the case of Biharis, but when it comes to *traumatic societies*, “a significant revision of [their] collective identity” (Madigan 52) is carried out by Bengalis who do not in principle consider such identity as being affected and reconstructed by any cultural trauma as such. Does it imply that Biharis are an invisible community?

Biharis are not invisible in the rhetorical sense of the term. Unlike the subaltern, they can speak. Their case of disparity, deprivation, loss, and harassment is well-circulated. The Bihari narrative is within easy reach of the international media. It is not the case that they have never been represented. Unlike many oppressed groups across the globe, they have attract-

ed coverage. However, what is at stake here is that they have waited out a satisfactory solution to their long standing case, but to no avail. By paying a random visit to the official website of the *Ref World*, a state-of-art online protection tool launched by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), one may come across a page entitled “Chronology for Biharis in Bangladesh”. Regrettably, they have not updated the chronology after the year 1999. One can take it as an allegorical instance of how the international media like the *Ref World* sometimes act remiss in their duty to stay alert to the probable follow-ups to a dreadful event, which indeed is a case in point for the wretched Biharis. In a footnote of her article featuring the Bihari chronicle, Agnieszka Kuczkiewicz-Fraś also brings to the notice of the reader this type of feckless attitude of the *Ref World* by alluding to a press note released by the same and glosses, “No exact or newer data concerning the number of the Urdu-speaking population in Bangladesh, especially those who live outside the camps and settlements, are available [after 2009]” (7). The official website of *Deutsche Welle* notes, “In 1974, Bangladesh and Pakistan signed an agreement mediated by India to repatriate the Bihari community in Bangladesh. Following the deal, 178,069 Biharis were sent to Pakistan between the years 1973 to 1993. . . .” Furthermore, “the last repatriation of the Biharis in Pakistan in the early 1990s triggered huge protests from the locals of the country's Sindh province. No government in Pakistan has dared to speak of Biharis’ repatriation ever since. . . .” In 2008, the Biharis in Bangladesh were officially accorded citizenship in a High Court ruling, which was thought to turn their situation on its head. But Victoria Redclift argues, “What it revealed instead was the internal borders (based on ethnicity, gender, age and social status) that disable the right to have rights on the ‘soft inside’. Exclusions at the borders are transposed into claims at the interior, exposing both statelessness and citizenship as equally uneven terrain” (7). Besides, foreign aid for them has always been scarce. What is worse, in the historical narratives produced in Bangladesh, there is little to no mention of this group. If mentioned at all, they have been unapologetically condemned as the collaborators of the marauding Pakistani army: “By virtue of their collective categorization as collaborators during the 1971 War of Liberation, ‘stranded Pakistanis’ or Biharis (as Urdu-speaking refugees to East Pakistan/Bangladesh are popularly referred to) have been written out of Bangladeshi nationalist discourses” (Siddiqi 151). The onus of the partly true and the partly imagined burden of the sins of their predecessors has lain on the succeeding generations since the war. Enclaved and socially ostracized, most of them have lived for generations under extreme financial difficulties and cultural duress. Javed Hasan, a camp resident, graphically presents the predicament of their community: “So three generations have grown up crippled—lacking

in proper education, assistance, even medical care. Today, there are so many initiatives being taken worldwide to improve the status of women. But no NGO, Islamic organization or UN body gives us a second look. All because we're not officially refugees" (qtd. in Siddiqi 173). Therefore, although Biharis as an endangered community have off and on been featured in the international media, such representations hardly bear out the reality of their situation.

If fiction has a latent potential to offer an alternative history, a history that is surreptitious and always on the margins, one will be disappointed again in Bangladeshi fiction that features its war of liberation concerning the tragic tale of Biharis. In 2021, the country celebrated its golden jubilee of independence. To the best of my knowledge, in the last fifty years since independence, there has hardly been any work of fiction by any Bangladeshi author where the melancholic history of Biharis has taken center stage. In the "Notes" section of her 2013 article titled "Left behind by the Nation: 'Stranded Pakistanis' in Bangladesh", Dina M. Siddiqi informs us:

It is only in the last decade or so that the subject of Bihari (non) citizenship has entered mainstream cultural discourse. Filmmaker Tanvir Mokammel produced the documentary *Promised Land* in 2007 to critical acclaim and some criticism. Short story writer Mahmud Rahman has also dealt with the topic. Earlier, in 1994, an English language novel [*Seasonal Adjustments*] featured a protagonist who cites the "indiscriminate slaughter of the Biharis by Bangladeshis after 1971" for his leaving Bangladesh in disillusionment after the Liberation War. The author, Adib Khan does not record any specific incidents of violence. (177)

Interestingly, the two novels I will critically read in this paper are but recent publications. Both were published in the early 2010s. Neither of the authors can claim to be in the world of fiction writing for long. For both Aquila Ismail and Ruby Zaman, the two novels—*Of Martyrs and Marigolds* (hereinafter OMM) and *Invisible Lines* (hereinafter IL) respectively—are their maiden attempts. Unsurprisingly, one of them is of Bihari descent. Aquila Ismail's parents came to East Pakistan from Bihar after the partition. As a family, they lived a quiet, uninterrupted, and peaceful life up until 1971 when the sociocultural tussle and economic discontent between the two wings eventually escalated into a civil war. Things turned on their heads, and the Ismail family had to pay the price for being Biharis. They left Bangladesh for Pakistan in 1972. Nobody questioned their loyalty, nobody cared about which side they

were on, and nobody even bothered to think for a moment that not everyone belonging to the community would hold on to the same ideology. There were also Bengali collaborators of the military. They were staunch pro-Pakistan supporters. Nevertheless, it was Biharis and other non-Bengalis who were the usual suspects. What was more shocking was that despite living on the same soil for years together, they were quickly labeled as outsiders as soon as the catastrophic war broke down. Their racial identity was enough for them to fall victim to rogues and rebels during the war and later to the state-sponsored tyranny in its wake. In this regard, Papiya Ghosh's observation is worth mentioning: "The dimensions of the 1946 riot in Bihar provided a preview of the post-partition flow of Muhajirs to the east and west, and the journey to the homeland based on religion. In the epic that unfolded, Biharis became something of a simultaneous metaphor of *qurbani* (sacrifice) and *gair-mulkiness* [alien-ness] in Pakistan." (xiv). She goes on to say, "The post-1971 'influx of Muslims from Bangladesh' into India is a trend that is seen to have begun with the flow of 'Bihari-Muslim collaborators of the Pakistani regime'" (xiv-xv). *OMM* is semi autobiographical: "Educator Aquila Ismail has woven elements of her own life into a fictional tapestry of love, sorrow, violence, and regret" (Scott, *Foreword Reviews*). Having kept silent for four decades after the plight of Biharis that they faced in the wake of the Bangladesh War, Aquila Ismail decided in 2008 to finally write about their tragic story because "[t]here have been lies after lies after lies as far as treatment of Biharis is concerned. I think the record should be put straight" (*Tribune*). The result, as expected, is the gestation of the novel *OMM*. In her interview with *The Express Tribune*, Ismail gives her reasons for recounting her personal story in the fictional form, "I thought it should be a novel because fiction is able to take care of the complexities of conflict, the shades of grey that history does not take into account." In the same feature, *The Express Tribune's* correspondent Ratool Zehra informs us:

But curiously, little has been written about the persecution faced by the Biharis. That is now changing. Last year [2011], Sharmila [sic] Bose's *Dead Reckoning* generated controversy for suggesting that Bengalis were not just passive victims, but committed "appalling atrocities" in the war for their liberation. Ruby Zaman's novel *Invisible Lines* with its half-Bihari heroine also brought out hitherto unrecognized dimensions of the conflict.

Ruby Zaman, unlike Aquila Ismail, is a Bangladeshi author. She is a trained lawyer and has

lived in different countries including England and Pakistan. She is an active social worker.

Given the authorial information and the historical context of the novels, I seek to understand a few more things. In broad strokes, the two novels are all variations on the theme of the war and its ensuing turmoil suffered by those who have no stake or involvement in it. Both raise and promote antiwar issues and are exercises in meditation on the relevance of war. Put differently, both novels follow the trope of the bildungsroman as their female protagonists grow up, come of age, and are faced with the inevitable questions of life since they involuntarily experience the horror of war. Whereas Ismail's central character is Bihari by birth, Zaman's, as already signaled by Ratoool Zehra, has a mixed pedigree—she is half Bihari and half Bengali. Wounded by an emotional loss, a character in a bildungsroman usually embarks on an allegorical journey and goes in search of life's big questions, the answers to which inculcate in her the experience of the world. Unlike what happens in a traditional bildungsroman, the traumatic experiences the two protagonists go through are fortuitous and unintended. As a matter of fact, they journey around and through trauma. They are left with no option but to go on a separate journey afterward. The period of latency or the interval can only mean for them to revisit their trauma or to get away with it. Ellen Morgan sees the genre of the bildungsroman as “admirably suited to express the emergence of women from cultural conditioning into struggle with institutional forces, their progress towards the goal of full personhood, and the effort to reconstruct their lives and society according to their own vision of meaning and right living” (qtd. in Joannou 215-216). Along the same line as Morgan's, I would argue that the latency in and the recurrence of their trauma offer an educative value for the two protagonists as it endows them with an urge for introspection, maturation, and at the same time develops in them a fellow feeling for their community. In all, they go through a sort of transformation, and not only a mere change—“it was as though the genocide had transformed them to the extent that they were ripped completely away from their prior selves” (Yusin xiii). What is at stake is that:

the very form and functioning of the processes of *transformation* inscribed within the living being [the survivor of a traumatic incident] reveal the ways in which it resists the production of a stereotype or range. A finite, vulnerable being includes the experience of the materiality of the event [the war, for example] to the extent that it changes the ontological meaning of the wound and wounding in its self-differentiating movements and increasingly complex formative processes. (Yusin xiii, my italics)

Nonetheless, does this transformation eventually divest them of and make them work through their preponderant trauma as signaled in the preceding sentence, or does their trauma transform them in ways contingent on the very unstable nature of life itself following the event of the war?

Summaries of the Novels

Both novels—*OMM* and *IL*—start in medias res. *OMM* starts off in the present when the Bihari family, whose members are the central characters of the text, is raided, then the events that led up to the incident of invasion are shown in a series of chronological flashbacks. The text thenceforth progresses in a linear fashion and merges again into the present after keeping up with the convention of normal chronology. *IL* follows suit as it begins with the present, unfolds in flashback, and eventually develops by setting two different time frames—alternating between the past and the present. The narrative nonetheless does not harbor non-linear features inside a linear framework. The two different temporalities are readily discernible. Time is not a tool of an experiment for either of the two authors. However, space and time in relation to both narratives serve a much deeper purpose. They manifest how human interaction and cultural constructs conditioned by and contingent on power policy can drastically change due to the geopolitical change: “Geopolitics, as the struggle over the control of geographical entities, focuses upon power, or the ability to achieve particular goals in the face of opposition or alternatives (Flint 69). Colin Flint further argues, “Hence social relations, and the abilities of actors to force, cajole, or convince another actor to do what is wanted, or for that ‘acted-upon’ actor to resist, to varying degrees” (70). The fundamental cultural differences marked by language, ethnicity, religion, etc., assume considerable importance. Those differences are apparently time-tested and monolithic, but they implode into an all-out war when the sociopolitical divide is catapulted into an uncontrollable outbreak of the crisis. Space and time stand on both ends and fluidly slide into each other, thereby blurring the divide even more. Time determines the spatial course of belonging. Space-contingent belonging is entwined with the winding course of time:

As belonging raises questions about boundaries of “difference”, collectivities and social bonds, it also points to when and how differences count, their normative and political evaluation, and how they are struggled over. . . . Belongings . . . are

enactments in social space that articulate power relations, and the discourses around them; actors and groups use these as resources and as meaning-making tropes. (Anthias 25)

The question that bothers both authors and the issue both seem inclined for the reader to draw attention to are what belonging means for Biharis as well as for Bengalis; who belong and why; how the ones that claimed to have belonged are made to question their claim, etc. In other words, both novelists seem interested in taking the reader on a bumpy ride of how history unfolds in newer ways as soon as the issue of belonging takes hold.

Aquila Ismail uses the catechism technique in her novel *OMM* in order to get her message across to the reader. Catechism is originally defined as a “summary or exposition of doctrine, traditionally used in Christian religious teaching. Catechisms are doctrinal manuals often in the form of questions followed by answers to be memorized, a format that has sometimes been used in non-religious or secular contexts as well” (*New World Encyclopedia*). By catechism, I allude to a series of questions, answers, or precepts used for self-reflection, instruction, etc. To this end, Ismail makes the parents of her female protagonist engage in random, intermittent but necessary dialogs by means of which she philosophizes on the questions of integration and exclusion, the aftermath of mass migration, acculturation, and its various facets, and a self-consciously distanced annotation on the movement of the plot as executed by the two characters in conversation. The dialogs are effective to the extent that they instill in the other characters clustering around these two an education momentous enough to reconstruct their personality. In *IL*, Ruby Zaman, on the other hand, adds in several subplots and a host of characters and evenly distributes among them bits and pieces of the plot. The trajectory of it sometimes points in no direction and the assemblage of way too many characters often seems pointless. However, what this diegetic world comprised of the multitude does effectuate is a dialogic imagination made possible by the integration of various communities—not only Biharis or Bengalis but also West Pakistanis, diasporic, and so on. Notably, both novels end on a note of silence as the central characters work through their trauma. Silence implodes into action—it is an invitation sent by the emerging narratives to the historical narratives seeking a passage for transmission and difference. It also signals an impending conflict or conflicting coexistence. I would argue that through skillful employment of a doodle of characters representing communities and dialogs mounting to

and followed by a disruptive silence, the two novelists enable their narratives to rupture the national metanarratives, to permeate through their immunitary paradigm. I will expound on this term (immunitary paradigm) in the latter part of the section. At this point, let us take a quick look at the overviews of the two novels.

Aquila Ismail's novel centers on Suri, the female protagonist, who is in her early twenties. In early February of 1972, immediately after the end of the liberation war of Bangladesh on December 16, 1971, the Bangladesh military makes a sudden covert raid upon the Bihari people in retaliation for their suspected collaboration with the Pakistan military during the war. True that a certain portion of them collaborated, but not everyone; besides, a good number of Bengalis sided with the marauding army as well. Suri's father and younger brother Sami are taken on a bus to an unknown place while the rest of the family comprising her mother, younger sister Munni, and herself are herded separately into a building along with fellow Bihari women and children. They are treated with humiliation there. Meanwhile, Suri's elder brother Sadi goes missing for several days. From here on we see flashbacks of the characters' pasts.

Suri's parents identified themselves as Urdu-speaking Biharis who migrated from the state of Bihar in British India to the then East Pakistan (present-day Bangladesh) after the partition. Unlike some of their family members who went to West Pakistan, Suri's father found it more convenient mainly due to the geographical location to shift to East Pakistan. Although language was a barrier for them since the majority of East Pakistanis spoke Bengali, they settled in quite comfortably and started to cohabit peacefully with their Bengali counterparts. Suri's father intimated to his family that he intended to live in this province of Pakistan as they were forced to migrate from their place of birth. Ismail takes great pains to draw a faithful and vivid picture of a landscape, which hosted this migrant family. Suri was born in East Pakistan and had a wonderful childhood with her Bengali friends. Initially, they lived in Kushtia, a southern district of the province. Then they moved to Narayanganj, another district near Dhaka, the capital of East Pakistan. Suri spent most of her childhood days in Narayanganj. Then she spent her youth in Dhaka as her father was transferred there. Her father was a well-paid govt. official. Her parents were sympathetic to Bengalis. Despite being Urdu speakers, they neither welcomed the decision of the imposition of Urdu as the state language on Bengalis nor liked West Pakistanis' racist attitude towards Bengalis.

When the tussle between the two wings of Pakistan began revolving principally around the issues of autonomy and economic discrimination, Bengalis singled out Biharis as the cultural other supporting the military regime. Even then Suri's family sympathized with the Bengali cause. During her university years, Suri fell in love with Rumi, a sensible Bengali boy from her university. The story then develops chronologically. Suri's romance and the turmoil of the country continued hand in hand. After the military crackdown on Bengalis on March 25, 1971, Bengalis retaliated by massacring Biharis. Suri's family lived in constant awe throughout the war. After the end of the war, the female members of Suri's family are trafficked to a makeshift camp in a remote village as signaled at the beginning of the novel. Suri along with other Bihari women endures military brutality there. Rumi, Suri's lover, rescues them as he has some friends in high places. Suri manages somehow to meet his father at last with the help of Rumi, but her two brothers by then were done in by the Bengali rebels. The novel ends with Suri's nostalgic lament for lost love for the country which once hosted them: "Rumi, my Rumi, nothing is permanent in the cycle of history" (Ismail 292).

Ruby Zaman's novel narrates the story of Zebunnesa Rahim. Zeb's paternal family emigrated to East Pakistan from Bihar during the partition. Her maternal grandfather was a top-notch politician from East Pakistan. He married his beautiful daughter off to an almost ugly-looking son of a Bihari just out of a pledge he had made earlier to Zeb's paternal grandfather. The marriage turned out to be a disaster. Born into an unhappy family, Zeb quickly bonded with their housemaid whom she called Didi. Zeb had a bittersweet childhood. While she was a darling pet in her father's eyes, she was de trop to her mother for her dark skin. Her family was one the wealthiest in Chittagong, the port city of East Pakistan. In her teens, she fell in love with a half Scot and half Bengali boy whom she had met at a friend's residence. Her maternal grandfather died on the eve of the war. Meanwhile, the war had broken out. In the hubbub of the war, Zeb embarked on a train ride along with her father to join her grandfather's postfuneral ceremony. Some miscreants from the side of the Bengali rebels attacked the duo on the train at night, butchered her father in front of her eyes, and raped her. Thrown out of the train, she was rescued by a few freedom fighters. The traumatized Zeb headed out again to see her mother at her grandparents' but discovered that the Pakistan army had ravaged the house and raped her mother. Her mother committed suicide in no time. Zeb was raped in that house again.

Her Didi took her to one of her father's friends whose family nursed her back to health. When the war ended, an Italian business partner and friend of her father's took her under his

wings. She flew to Italy leaving everything behind. As signaled before, the narrative moves between flashbacks and flashforwards. In the early eighties, Zeb undergoes long-term treatment for her trauma and struggles hard to pull herself together. Love comes back to her life. She falls for the son of the Italian man. But this time she finds herself quite restrained unlike the passionate spells of her teens. She finally settles in London but prepares to pay a friendly visit to the country of her origin to meet her Didi after long periods of time. The novel ends on Zeb's hard toil to work through her traumatic memory.

In Pursuit of Justice

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While Ismail's text patently and to some extent graphically details the Bihari torture, cautiously touches on their sudden and unexpected turn of fate, encompasses a wide range of issues surrounding Biharis, and empathically presents their case like that of a community, Zaman's text rather seems intent on featuring different communities. She gives the networked communities—both home and abroad—sympathetic treatment. No doubt the spoils of war take a heavy toll on not only Biharis but also on other communities like religious minorities, indigenous micro-ethnic tribes, the so-called social pariahs, small political groups, and so on. On the face of it, this effort is worth serious attention. However, unlike Ismail's narrative, it never goes any deeper. Moreover, Zaman seems to lavish all her sympathy on the select few. Her community treatment never goes beyond the elite in East Pakistan or from the South Asian diaspora abroad. OMM edges along this direction too as Ismail on occasions unabashedly flirts with the idea of the rise of the Bihari bourgeoisie in East Pakistan. Nevertheless, she quickly balances it out by featuring the ongoing problems the East Pakistani Bengalis confronted. In the catechistical episodes in particular, as mentioned before, her sympathy clearly lies with the Bengali cause.

Barring these issues, to me, both novels successfully bring to the reader's attention the issue of moral injury and its adverse effect—immunization of the state in regard to Bengalis' cultural trauma that foregrounds secular Bengali nationalism. Before giving an exposition of the cause-and-effect relationship between moral injury and immunization, I would like to briefly highlight the term moral injury. While explaining how the perpetrator's trauma is deeply implicated in moral injury, Joshua Pederson initially draws out the idea of moral injury: "Briefly, moral injury is the enduring psychic pain that may afflict someone who either commits or witnesses a significant moral transgression" (12). In other words, while directly or

vicariously exacting perpetration on victims, the persecutor may feel morally guilty for her action and later such guilt can turn into shame, corrupting her normal psychic mechanism. She may experience traumatic glimpses of her own perpetration. Tancred's case as alluded to by Freud and as illustrated by Cathy Caruth in her seminal book *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* obviates it.

As for Bengalis, their moral injury is not evident but secretly at work. It functions at least on three counts—a) Bengalis' conscious/unconscious effort at erasing the history of partition from their collective memory. As Dina M. Siddiqi argues, "Reading the history of 1971 without taking into account 1947 does not simply produce incomplete histories; such a move obscures the historically constitutive processes through which categories of (national) Self and Other are produced and naturalized, and the dynamics that allow for the privileging of some narrative accounts and simultaneous displacement of others" (151-152); b) by sidelining the partition history, they paradoxically foreground their cherished history of secular nationalism, which cannot predate the incident of the 1952 Language Movement. It is so because there was no evidence of concerted effort at the mass level to promote secular nationalism. A few Left-leaning politicians tried that too but failed to garner public support. The history before 1952 is a long history of the Pakistan dream as already mentioned; c) and their ignoble attempt to stunt the Bihari trauma. Already collectively traumatized, Bengalis know for sure that the other races and/or communities living in the same territory may indulge in their own. Biharis not only represent the Urdu-speaking community living on Bengali soil, but they stand in for the lost Pakistan dream. In short, their presence works as a reminder of the partition. But this political secession in many ways is akin to Freud's castration anxiety. Once seceded, the newborn country cannot acknowledge its debt to the parental country, especially when it comes down to establishing a sense of (secular Bengali) nationalism without any grounded roots. Consequently, they send their vexing moral injury down into the Political Unconscious. What Bangladeshis do as a nation is that they dwarf the Bihari trauma or altogether reject it by imposing on them their nationalist narratives of cultural trauma. They do not simply stop at that, rather they allure Biharis with the proposition of accepting Bengali nationhood in exchange for civil rights as evidenced by the postconflict action of the martyred president Shaikh Mujibur Rahman, the acclaimed father of the Bengali nation: "The non-Bengalis who were citizens of Pakistan and residents in the then East Pakistan will be treated as equal citizens if they declare allegiance to the government of Bangladesh" (qtd. in Siddiqi 165, italics in the original). Dina M. Siddiqi rightly

says that by issuing such a decree the newly established Bangladeshi govt. in effect foisted Bengali nationality on the non-Bengali Urdu speakers who had applied for repatriation to Pakistan through the International Committee of the Red Cross; in truth, such a proclamation also rendered these people “non-citizens” in their own land, many of whom were born there (165). This in short is the immunity paradigm proposed by Roberto Esposito. The Bengali state immunizes the foreign body (Biharis in this case) and incorporates it into its own body in controlled measures only to later normatively excise or repel it as it deems right.

These two novels competently expose this immunity scheme and call for a possible measure by which a fresh and polemic reading of history is possible. Such a transitional-justice measure poses a challenge to the metanarratives of Bangladeshi history. It also takes pains to apply salve to the injured psyche of a community, which is gradually vanishing without a trace. As Anja Mihr comments, “[A]cknowledgement can be carried out through initiating and responding to public debates, producing films and documentaries, publishing literature or novels about the past. ...” (4) The two literary texts are at fault and inescapably replete with various textual limitations, but the point at which both ably cross the threshold is where they can shake the bedrock of metahistory of Bengali nationalism and appeals the reader to look at history afresh. Albeit such presumed success, the moot point of their crossing the threshold begs a series of questions: first off, how may the arbitrary emergence of these novels function to disrupt “the immunity paradigm” of the domineering nationalist narratives of Bangladesh by means of which any potential threat “is incorporated within the border, but only in order to be more effectively repelled?” (Mills 90) As Catherine Mills informs, “This logic of repulsion or defense via controlled incorporation is central to Esposito’s thinking” (90). My second concern leans more on Irving Goh’s concept of the *reject*. In the light of Goh’s theorization, the accused, perpetrated, and disadvantaged community of Biharis can be said to have long been stuck with the tag the *passive reject*—the multitude that receives rejection outright without a protest, those whose voices are quickly silenced, or as Esposito might say, those who are calculatedly incorporated so that they can be tactically kept at bay later. Do these newly emerging narratives have the potential for a change, for bringing about transitional justice, so to speak, to the rejected community in postconflict times? To what extent can such an endeavor safely function as an emergence of the *auto-reject* that has the capacity of resistance without overpowering the other? Finally, I want to explore why the envisioned community for the disadvantaged Muslims—the so-called one Ummah (the whole community of Muslims bound together by ties of religion)—

rather than working as a community autoimmunizes itself and thereby makes new norms that tend to be thanatopolitical. A supplementary question now is in order: how do these two authors map out the vision and the fall of the Ummah in their texts? However, these questions are beyond the scope of the current paper and would require another to navigate through the issue of the moral injury of Bengalis and how it in complex ways is implicated in the cultural trauma of Biharis, so I leave aside those considerations for a future endeavor.

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