

**REMEMBERING 1971: WOMEN'S NARRATIVES OF THE
BANGLADESH LIBERATION WAR AND POST-WAR REFLECTIONS**

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MEDHA BHADRA CHOWDHURY

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

FACULTY OF ARTS

JADAVPUR UNIVERSITY

KOLKATA 700032

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Certified that the Thesis entitled

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Submitted by me for the award of the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Arts at Jadavpur
University is based upon my work carried out under the Supervision of

DR. SUTANUKA GHOSH

And that neither this thesis nor any part of it has been submitted before for any degree or
diploma anywhere/elsewhere.

Countersigned by the

Supervisor: *Sutanuka Ghosh*

Dated: *28/04/2021*

Candidate:

Indu Chowdhury

Dated: *28.04.2021*

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

(1.1)Abstract

The Bangladesh Liberation War (1971) which seemingly originated from regional problems in the Eastern half of Pakistan was not an unprecedented event in South Asian history. According to historian, Srinath Raghavan, “The political developments in the subcontinent since the Partition of India in 1947, *logically* and *inevitably* led to the disintegration and partition of Pakistan. The history of the emergence of Bangladesh, then, is no more than the chronicle of a birth foretold.”¹ There was no single pretext, no single cause, no single front, no single enemy. The war was the explosion of anger, hatred, and fear that penetrated every aspect of people's lives. No space could provide shelter against the ubiquity of danger. There was no longer any difference between the experiences of the home and the street, the private and the public domain. This war has been variously described as economic, religious, political, civil and ethnic: economic because of the rapidly growing poverty and deprivation of the population living in East Pakistan, which was tightening its hold on the bourgeois center of power; religious because of widespread dissatisfaction among the two dominant religious communities (Hindus and Muslims) that proportional representation was no longer equitable; political because from a Pakistani perspective it was perceived as a war of secession, with India playing an instrumental role in instigating Bengali separatism and for using the ensuing crisis to vivisect Pakistan; civil and ethnic because it was a crisis which involved local militia who were supported militarily and financially by Pakistan, widening the gap between the Bengali and non-Bengali identity.

The current historiography of the Liberation War is focused primarily on the investigation of political issues, the military aggression between armies and militia of West Pakistan, East Pakistan, and India and the contexts of clashes between the different ethnic groups of Bengalis, Biharis and West Pakistanis. The inner conflicts within the communities which led to widespread

¹ Srinath Raghavan, *1971: A Global History of the Creation of Bangladesh* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013), 6.

violence against women have often been conveniently overlooked and women's experiences and memories of the war have been rendered invisible in the official history of 1971. The lived experiences of oppressed groups, particularly women have been retold in an extremely selective and reconstructive manner often leading to distortions and shifts from reality. In many ways, the male narratives and memoirs of the Bangladesh Liberation War are concerned with addressing certain fundamental questions which express a need to rationalize and periodize the events of 1971 – the attack on the intelligentsia, the nature of civilian responses, the political and military organization, the differences in reactions of the Left organizations, the encroachment on human rights and liberties – these are some of their primary concerns.

The exclusivist approach adopted by state-sponsored narratives and historical accounts has especially affected the private histories of women in Bangladesh during the period of the Liberation War. There is a deliberate absence of the traces of trauma and victimhood undergone by women in popular discourse because a culture of denial and shame shrouds rape. In examining the intersections of gender and war, Miriam Cooke observes that “Gender analysis reveals that the execution of mass, legitimized, psychotic violence depends on a particular way of constructing and maintaining gender identities.”² It is crucial to look at the way gender is located among the participants of the war, as well as its victims. The Liberation War of Bangladesh cannot be placed as a determinative event in our memory if gender violence is obfuscated as a category of analysis. The histories of women once again will be obliterated.

A curious case of collective amnesia is at play, where the war narratives are legitimized based on constructed, ethereal victims and even individual memory is riddled with a sense of discomfort while recollecting a past trauma. The shadows of victimhood legitimize action but require that actual victims remain behind the scene. Nayanika Mookherjee in *The Spectral Wound, Sexual Violence, Public Memories and the War of Bangladesh 1971*, evokes the ‘comb’ metaphor to address the issue of public memory and secrecy. Revelation and repression occur at the same juncture according to Mookherjee and the ‘wound’ or injury assumes a spectral quality.

Mookherjee observes that there is a distinct shift in attitude towards the reception of the ‘birangona’ in recent times, which has caused an unprecedented change in the politics of public memory and cultural representation. Although the ‘birangona’ is still located outside kinship

² Miriam Cooke, *Women and the War Story* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 48.

structures, the physical wound or ‘rape’ in the 1970’s has come to be perceived as a social injury in the 1990’s. The 1992 Civil Movement following the creation of the ‘Ekattorer Ghatak Dalal Nirmul’ Committee (1991) chaired by Jahanara Imam initiated a process of public trial or ‘gono adalat’ where three ‘birangona’s’ came forth with their account. The publication of the Government Gazette (1991) listing the names of women Muktiyoddhas and inducting two women intellectuals: Saleena Parveen (journalist) and Meherunessa (poet) in the category of ‘shaheed’ also marked a significant turn in public consciousness. The reconstruction of collective memory, which has comfortably escaped the representation of these women is problematic since the canon of historical narratives and records perform normative value functions by occupying the forefront of our living memory. Yet moral concerns and ontological dilemmas remain profoundly unresolved.

The omission of women’s experiences has not only conditioned the ‘birangona’ issue but it has also pervaded the representation of mothers who lost their sons in war. The title ‘shaheed janani’ bore the aggrandized image of the despairing mother who had sacrificed her sons for the cause of the nation. What appeared less grievous since it did not involve the public shame or ‘lanchana’ associated with a ‘birangona’, nevertheless, allowed the experiences of a different kind of violation. The violation of motherhood and the domestic trauma of losing a child were issues which were largely overlooked in the process of creating larger than life representations of the self sacrificing ‘janani’. Their suffering was publically told and displayed and their demands for justice articulated, but their profound anxieties such as the feeling of being abandoned, the disempowerment associated with the loss of motherhood and the disruption of the motherline were unavailable in the absence of personal narratives and testimonies. The testimonies and memoirs of the ‘shaheed janani’ also extended the consciousness of the few to the many but these were excluded from history because of their irrelevance to mainstream concerns. Instead, cultural historians devoted their reading and writing energies to national, ‘masculine’ concerns.

In piecing together the aspects of their life during the war, the memoirs of Bengali women (the ‘birangonas’ and ‘shaheed jananis’) recreate the past through the dynamics of a conversational remembering within their social group as opposed to national/historical records or the transnational circulation of war memories through reports. As compared to fiction, the memoir unfolds the memory of people who actually lived through the event and constructs a sense of the

past from the most mundane, every day experiences. It is interesting to investigate the emergence of a coherent pattern in the realms of silence and of remembering which emerges in the memoirs written by women authors. The memoir is located in a complex psychological space since it simultaneously reveals the social shape of individual memory and the individualized aspects of a collective memory. The individual remembers by placing himself in the perspective of the group but also affirms that the memory of the group manifests itself in individual memory.

This thesis seeks to argue that the memoirs of Bengali women play a strategic role in the unfolding of a collective memory and a dynamic social history. They provide a distinct viewpoint which is refracted through conflicting prisms and contrary to the accounts written by the contemporary male historians and authors. It is not simply a gender ideology which is expressed through their works but the ‘micro’ aspect of a tearing apart reveals the immensely traumatic ordeal of an injured and massacred population. Women’s narratives are tremendously valuable tools for identifying the needs of women during and after periods of violent conflict and, indeed, for transforming conflict itself. Therefore, this thesis will make an effort to document and read the stories of women who are not only victims but are also agents of change amid the ruins of their war-torn societies.

These critical concerns have been explored in the following chapters of the thesis through a detailed study of the primary texts. In the first section, Nilima Ibrahim’s *Ami Birangona Bolchi* (1996) which consists of the oral narratives of seven birangonas and a recent collection, *Rising from the Ashes* (2019) which has collected the experiences of twenty two women who survived rape, eviction and displacement during the war have been critically discussed. Reading the narratives of women, who were marginalized or silenced, can yield alternative voices, painting a fuller picture than simplified rhetoric. It can enable participation in the narrative process which is important for a range of reasons, primarily to gain deeper understandings of different perceptions of history and to seek justice and healing on both the personal and community levels.

In the second section, the politics of national commemoration and the gendered state ideology have been examined with respect to the ‘shaheed janani’. Jahanara Imam’s *Ekattorer Dinguli* (1986) which chronicles her experiences during the nine month long conflict wherein she lost her son, Shafi Imam Rumi has been closely analyzed. Imam’s diary gives visibility to those disproportionately affected by armed conflict; these stories must be amplified to eliminate the

disconnection between the powerful and the powerless to provide understanding of the dynamics of conflict. The issue of justice for the violation of human rights and war crimes has also been probed into in relation to how they have reshaped women's histories and re-signified the ideology of martyrdom and motherhood.

Finally, the thesis takes into account Taslima Nasrin's *Amar Meyebela* (2002) as an example of a memoir written by a contemporary woman writer revisiting her childhood spent in the midst of the turmoil of war and reflecting upon the present situation of women in Bangladesh three decades after liberation.

(1.2) Historical Overview

The Liberation War of Bangladesh (1971) cannot be read as a solitary historical event, it must be treated as part of a continuum. Writing on the trauma of the Partition of 1947 in the East, Jashodhara Bagchi argues that the events of 1971 and India's involvement in the Bangladesh Liberation War made us live through the pain of Partition once again. The Partition of Bengal in 1947 provoked massive transfers of population both in the eastern and western parts of the subcontinent leading to the creation of an independent Islamic nation state - Pakistan, which was further divided in two halves on the basis of the religious majority residing in each territory. These two areas had their own region-specific distinctions and were socially and politically different. East Bengal was largely inhabited by Bengalis in sharp contrast to the Punjabis, Sindhis, Balochis, Pathans and other ethnic groups residing in various provinces of West Pakistan. The structural friction came to the surface when the two parts became 'One Country' despite the socio-cultural dissimilarities.

While the Lahore Resolution of the Muslim League of 1940 clearly emphasized that these two regions would constitute two 'Independent Muslim States', the formation of Former Pakistan as a unitary state not only indicated a violation of the above resolution but also displayed a serious ignorance of the ground reality. The feudal-tribal leaders of West Pakistan were oriented towards the maintenance of status quo "they believed in rough and ready methods and distrusted rules,

form, and courts as devices invented in towns to cheat the sturdy countrymen. They lived in an atmosphere of crisis, pistol-on holster, and were ready to take horse to deal with rebels at a moment's notice.”³ In contrast, the people in the East, living in a more politicized and decentralized Bengal, by and large, depended upon prudent policy and looked forward to stable constitutional governance in order to ensure that their predominantly middle class leaders were able to consolidate their historical gains in a period of decolonization.

The process of national integration was difficult and tumultuous since the geographical division of the two parts complicated the creation of a homogeneous political culture. While the new Muslim leadership in the West dominated by the feudal-military-bureaucratic elite sought to establish an authoritative system of administration, similar to that adopted by the British in these circumstances, the condition in the East was very different. In East Bengal, the Bengali middle class intelligentsia in favour of a democratic polity, expected to step into the vacuum created by the sudden crisis and capture substantial political power at the centre by virtue of their numerical superiority through the expected general election. The leaders, who inherited power in West Pakistan at the time of Partition, even if they understood the aspirations of the Bengali Muslims, were unlikely to be sympathetic to their vision of a new form of political structure.

While it is apparent that efforts were made to accommodate the divergent political interests and needs of the population of East Bengal, the tension between the two wings arising from a fundamental disequilibrium intensified further and reached its peak in 1958 during the military coup. The constitutional process was disrupted by the control of the military which sought to exercise its power in the interest of national security and swiftly proceeded to take over the State from the untrustworthy political class of leaders and civilian bureaucracy.

“As long as the Army's financial autonomy was maintained (the defense expenditure of Pakistan has constantly remained around 55% of the total revenue budget) and the foreign and defense policies were, if not initiated, cleared by the General Head Quarters, the Army top brass felt reasonably satisfied with the state of affairs in the country. It was a classic example of the Army

³ Percival Spear, *India: A Modern History* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1961), 266.

having the cake and eating it too. But this was a situation which was too good to last very long and, therefore, the 1958 coup was a logical inevitability, given the workings of the system.”⁴

The Bengali population felt further alienated as the totalitarian policies of the military government in many ways deprived them of their legitimate share of political and administrative participation. The defense of East Pakistan was entrusted to the hands of the West Pakistani army and recruitment of Bengalis to the army was severely curtailed in favour of enlisting the services of what was perceived as the more martial races; the Punjabis and Pathans. The civil services were also monopolized by West Pakistanis, who because of their feudal background and grooming in the Punjab administrative system, were largely ill-suited to the atmosphere prevalent in East Bengal.

Parallel to the political dissatisfactions, the more serious ‘language issue’ which developed in the 1950’s requires close examination in the context of the Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971. Language and ethnicity are intertwined, often in arresting ways, with politics and cultural representation. Language plays an instrumental role in determining the identity of an ethnic community and is transmitted through generations residing in a specific territory with common cultural roots giving birth to individual and social belief systems.

In 21st March 1948, only six months after Pakistan was formed, Mohammad Ali Jinnah, the country’s first governor-general, visited the province of East Bengal, where he addressed the students and faculty at Dhaka University’s convocation.

Let me restate my views on the question of a state language for Pakistan. For official use in [East Bengal], the people of the province can choose any language they wish. The question will be decided solely in accordance with the wishes of the people of this province alone, as freely expressed through their accredited representatives at the appropriate time and after full and dispassionate consideration. There can, however, be

⁴ Mohammad Ayoob, “The Military, Pakistan’s Political Development: Its Growing Strength and Implications,” in *Political System in Pakistan*, 5, ed. Verender Grover and Ranjana Arora (New Delhi: Deep and Deep Publications, 1995), 7.

only one lingua franca—that is, the language for intercommunication between the various provinces of the state— and that language should be Urdu and cannot be any other.⁵

His speech addressed the question of a national language, which was already on many citizens' minds as Pakistan began to formulate policies on governance. Jinnah believed that promoting and nurturing the adoption of a single national language of communication was crucial. More importantly, however, that language should represent the people as an Islamic nation. Though Bengali was the language most spoken in East Pakistan by a wide section of Bengali Muslims, Jinnah and many others in West Pakistan perceived that language as totally foreign to Muslim culture. A significant sense of intellectual elitism and ethnic supremacy became the reason for sectarian tensions, and language became a site of contestation. The autocratic-centrist language policy of Pakistan was viewed by Bengalis as originating from the cultural and ethnic superiority of the Pashto, Balochi and Punjabis who were traditionally identified as stock tribes and associated with the ruling elite in Pakistan.

Instead of accommodating the demand for Bengali as an official language, the police fired on demonstrators and students of Dhaka University on 21st February, 1952, killing several students and leading to an eruption of simmering tensions. Stanley Maron discussing the language controversy remarks:

“More than cultural pride is involved in the issue. Should Urdu be adopted as the national language, Bengalis would be handicapped in competitive examinations for generations to come. It also meant that a decision of vital national interest was to be imposed on the majority of the people against their will, at the behest of a minority in West Pakistan.”⁶

The Language Movement mobilized by the Bengali intelligentsia spread across the nation and the struggle for language came to be recognized as a disguised struggle for power. In East Bengal, the Bengali wing of the Muslim League lost its influence in the party and national politics when ousted by a loose assemblage of opposition groups in the provincial elections in 1954. However, to view the Bhasha Andolan as an attempt made by an ethnic community only to gain political strength would mean to neglect the social networks which were established on the

⁵ Mohammad Ali Jinnah, *The Nation's Voice, Vol. VII: Launching the State and the End of the Journey* (Aug. 1947 - Sept. 1948), ed. Waheed Ahmad (Karachi: Quaid-i-Azam Academy, 2003), 243.

⁶ Stanley Maron, “The Problem of East Pakistan,” *Pacific Affairs* XXVII, no. 2 (June 1995):133.

basis of solidarity and a sense of belonging within the community. The events of 1948-1952 triggered sentiments of cultural integrity and finally precipitated the Mukti Juddho (Liberation War) of 1971 which demanded political autonomy and total independence from what was perceived as a form of neo-colonialism.

The movement created an inclusiveness which integrated Bengalis in the struggle for self rule and more importantly established a literary and intellectual tradition distinctly separate from an Urdu-centric Islamic tradition that was enforced by West Pakistan. The rediscovery of cultural and linguistic affinities with the Bengali community which resided in India on the other side of the border was perceived by West Pakistan as a threat to national integrity (with the songs of Tagore and Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay being sung on the streets of Dhaka by the student community in their protest marches) but it was necessary to reclaim the purity of the Bengali language (one that was stigmatized as vulgar and rude as compared to Urdu).

The Language Movement resurrected the need for complete political autonomy, which was stipulated at the Grand National Convention, held in February, 1950, at Dhaka. The convention resolved that “East Bengal should be recognized not just as a province but as a fully autonomous State where a majority of Pakistanis live because only such recognition could bring political, cultural and economic results.”⁷ The consolidation of the four provinces of West Pakistan into ‘One Unit’ had already isolated the Bengalis but in the field of economic development, the East bloc further perceived a growing inequality. The fiscal policies of the central government in West Pakistan favoured industrial development partly by mobilizing resources from the rural poor to the urban capitalist (assuming that the propensities to save and invest were higher for the latter), and partly through foreign assistance. This pattern of development significantly increased economic inefficiency, inequality of income and wealth, resulting in significant loss of social welfare.

The loss of social welfare had a regional dimension, affecting agriculturalists and small scale industry workers in the East, as evident from the greater deterioration of trade and the agricultural sector vis-a-vis the manufacturing goods industry in the West which flourished through the concentration of revenue. The sustained economic exploitation and the lopsided

⁷ Kamruddin Ahmad, *The Social History of East Pakistan* (Dacca: Crescent Book Centre, 1967), 114.

model of development adopted by the central government of General Ayub Khan in 1958 was severely criticized by the leaders in the East leading to the formulation of the Six-Point Programme by the Awami League. In March 1966, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman advanced a six-point programme of autonomy for East Pakistan. This called for parliamentary democracy and a genuinely federal constitution; for restricting the powers of the federal government to defense and foreign affairs; for establishing two separate currencies for each wing; for devolving fiscal policy to the federating units; for maintaining separate foreign exchange earnings for each wing; and for raising a separate militia for the defense of East Pakistan.

David Loshank suggests that, “the paradox was this while the Six Point Formula went far beyond what West Pakistan could conceivably grant, it was the least that East Bengal could demand.”⁸ The fundamental irreconcilability of the two wings became so visible in the late 1960’s that Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was put on trial for allegedly conspiring with India to undermine the unity of Pakistan—the so-called Agartala conspiracy case, named after the eastern Indian town where Sheikh Mujib was alleged to have met and schemed with Indian agents.

The unremitting pressure from the protesters and the violent protests which erupted in 1968 led the Ayub Khan government to reassess their options. General Ayub Khan was forced to resign in favour of General Yahya Khan, who was expected to have a better understanding of the political situation in the East but fell prey to the illusion that East Bengal could be held by the superior military power of West Pakistan. On 26 March, 1969, General Yahya Khan broadcast his first speech announcing the imposition of martial law in the country.

Soon after his release, Sheikh Mujibur was feted with a massive rally organized by the students at Dhaka’s Race Course grounds; and was symbolically conferred with the title “Bangabandhu” (Friend of Bengal). The students’ eleven-point program, which was more radical than Sheikh Mujibur’s six points, was reiterated at that meeting. By acknowledging the students’ demands and by opting to ride the wave of radicalism triggered by their protests over the past months, Sheikh Mujibur gave a clarion call to the youth of Bengal to rise and claim their political right.

⁸ David Loshank, *Pakistan Crisis* (New York: McGraw Hill Book Company, 1971), 28.

Under pressure from the people, General Yahya Khan conceded the first general election in 1970 according to a specific legal framework, paving the way for a constitutional government. The student protests had transformed the political climate in Pakistan and made it impossible to turn the clock back, so the martial law authority hazily envisaged a constitutional order that would entrench the military as the “guardian” of the elected government. The rout of the religious parties and the Muslim League was predictable, as their notions of a centralized polity with paltry concessions to the East were wholly at odds with popular opinion.

The Awami League won an absolute majority in the election. Among Sheikh Mujibur’s signal successes was to secure the support of the Hindus for his party’s vision of Bengali nationalism. Despite the substantial delay of the military government of Yahya Khan to convene a meeting of the National Assembly and officially call the Awami League to form government, the party set about the task of framing a draft constitution based on the six points that they had presented to the constituent assembly. The recalcitrance of the martial government to obey the popular mandate of the people of East Pakistan led to the situation immediately deteriorating with wide scale conflicts between the authorities and civilians.

Although Sheikh Mujibur was keen on maintaining the health and integrity of Pakistan as a nation, the economic independence of East Pakistan was non-negotiable. If the six- point programme was not given due consideration in the future constitution of the country, he was determined to launch a mass movement. Sheikh Mujibur’s hardening stance stemmed from the increasing polarization of politics in the country’s two wings. The gathering steam of mistrust was given impetus by a succession of natural disasters that struck East Pakistan. In July 1970, the province was devastated by a flood that inundated large parts of eleven districts. Not a single political leader of any standing visited the eastern wing nor was any active relief work undertaken by the government.

The landslide victory of the Awami League made it impossible for West Pakistan to suppress the nationalistic sentiments of the East. Yet, disgruntled by the growing tide of dissent and increasing political pressure, the military leadership came down with massive force on the Awami League and its supporters. Operation Searchlight was launched in March, 1971 and targeted major cities to eliminate Bengali resistance. Large sections of the population openly demanded that Bangabandhu make an outright declaration of independence and the rising degree

of exasperation was anticipated to be quickly turning into a form of militancy. On the night of 25th March, 1971, the West Pakistani military massacred students, political activists, members of the intelligentsia and civilians in Dhaka, cracking down on Dhaka University and its student dormitories such as Jagannath Hall, Dhaka Hall, Rokeya Hall and the Dhaka Medical College Hospital. The attack of the West Pakistani army put an end to all efforts of negotiation and precipitated the Liberation War of 1971, giving rise to the new State of Bangladesh.

(1.3)The Genocide

Genocide, mass murder, and human rights abuses are arguably the most perplexing and deeply troubling aspects of recent world history. While the twentieth century witnessed the bodily, material, and psychological devastation of the Holocaust and made it difficult to forget the trauma of the Jewish genocide, several other records of genocide exist, which have perhaps been understudied due to a certain cultural relativism. The 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights has often been critiqued for being a statement of rights conceived only in terms of the values prevalent in the countries of Western Europe and America. Although legitimately fighting against cultural imperialism, this type of relativistic perspective has great difficulty responding to, let alone condemning, the atrocities committed during genocides and other forms of political violence in non-western societies.

In the present Convention, genocide means any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such: (a) Killing members of the group; (b) Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group; (c) Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part; (d) Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group; (e) Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group. —Article II, United Nations Genocide Convention (1948).

Most genocides are distinguished by a process of “othering” in which the boundaries of an imagined community are reshaped in such a manner that a previously “included” group (albeit often included only tangentially) is ideologically recast (almost always in dehumanizing rhetoric)

as being outside the community, as a threatening and dangerous “other”—whether racial, political, ethnic, religious, economic, and so on—that must be annihilated. A genocidal ‘intent’ develops from the idea of difference and the identification of the other group as an enemy. The brutalities are initiated and carried through under the immense pressure of conformity. The Bangladesh crisis had initially projected political and territorial dimensions with the central command struggling against secessionist elements who were keen on manipulating public opinion and who were perceived as disrupting the broader national identity in favour of a partisan politics. However, Pakistan failed to attract this functional requirement of national identity from a segment of its populace and Bengali nationalism was able to consolidate and strengthen beyond Pakistan’s nation building process. The new state of Bangladesh required a new encompassing national identity that would provide space for the peaceful co-existence of an Islamic religious and Bengali ethnic identity. In precipitating the genocide, this may be understood as one of the primary causes of discontent, a challenge to the goals of the central authoritative regime which sought to enforce a distinctive rigor, a homogeneous national consciousness and an ideological commitment. Hence, the final solution to the problem of nationalism was to annihilate part of a group in order to force the rest into submission. The perpetrators counted on the impact of terror to reach their objectives as was evident in the mass killing of intellectuals and students at the beginning of the conflict.

General Yahya Khan’s justification of the massacre on 25th March, 1971, indicates the same logic:

“Sheikh Mujibur Rahman’s action of starting his non-cooperation movement is an act of treason. He and his party have defiled the lawful authority for over three weeks. They have insulted Pakistan’s flag and defiled the photograph of the Father of the Nation. They have tried to run a parallel government. They have created turmoil, terror, insecurity.”⁹

Further, cleanliness and purity were terms that, necessarily, signified this binary opposition between the two groups. The political agenda of the perpetrators was often replete with images of the minority group as baser, weaker and impure. The popularization of the term ‘ethnic cleansing’ enables the understanding that although both the elect and the enemies might be

⁹ President’s Broadcast, *Pakistan Affairs*, No. 18, March 31, 1971 (Washington D.C.: Government of Pakistan), 45.

defined by class or national backgrounds, very often these identities are racialized and ethnicity recognized as a distinctive category. The policy of “homogenization” first derived from religious criteria was evident in the birth of the nation, but soon it was complicated by the question of ethnicity. The West Pakistani army’s brutal attack on the Bengali Hindu and Muslim community in East Bengal indicate a deliberate need to discriminate against and eliminate an ethnic group. The military apparatus in East Pakistan was directed towards a programme of ethnic cleansing which appeared premeditated and carefully designed although such charges were continuously denied by the authorities.

Anthony Mascarenhas in his first hand account of the Bangladesh Liberation War reports:

The genocide, I was to find out, was the “cleaning process” the military regime intended as a solution to the political problem. Hand and hand with it would go an equally brutal colonization of the province. “We are determined to cleanse East Pakistan once and for all of the threat of secession, even if it means killing off two million people and ruling the province as a colony for 30 years,” I was bluntly told in the 16th Division Headquarters at Comilla. This was the military regime’s “final solution” of the East Bengal problem. Not since Hitler has there been anything so diabolical.¹⁰

For the army it was difficult to operate secretly and insidiously conduct their operation of cleansing the country of intellectuals, non-communal elements, progressives, and Hindus, they were aided by the volunteer units of right-wing communal parties like Muslim League, Jamaat-e-Islami, and Nizam-e-Islam. They raised the Al Badr and Al Sham Bahinis (the more radical youth wing), who actively collaborated in the war efforts. Under army guidance they acted as informers in different working centres, making lists of suspects, rounding them up quietly from their houses at unearthly hours of night and handing them over to the army. Often they would participate in the torture and persecution of suspects. The army financed them heavily and provided them with cars and weapons for swift operations. The military authorities also found support in the ‘Razakars’, recognized as “good Muslims and loyal Pakistanis”, who were primarily recruited with the intention to politically win over the people in the countryside.

¹⁰ Anthony Mascarenhas, *The Rape of Bangladesh* (New Delhi: Vikas Publications, 1971), 117.

Contrary to their expectations, the ‘Razakars’ mostly anti-socials and Urdu-speaking Bihari Muslims, resorted to more regressive measures against the Bengalis, both Hindus and Muslims, turning them more hostile towards the army. It is debatable whether they were led by the army as reports often suggest, but at the peak of the war, the ‘Razakars’ had become uncontrollable raiding villages, looting private property and raping Bengali women as an act of racial hatred. They also provided their masters at the barracks a steady supply of women, looted articles and money. The ‘Razakars’ were feared for their aggression and their increasing numbers made them a force to reckon with. According to military authorities, the number of ‘Razakars’ in East Pakistan was between 30,000 -40,000, they were paid three rupees a day and received a seven day training which appeared to consist entirely of learning how to shoot a Lee-Enfield gun.

Kalyan Chaudhuri explains their joint operations:

These people were in fact representatives of political parties routed in the December 1970 elections, with an admixture of men with criminal records and bigoted Muslims. They were given full freedom to rule the country and their conduct could not be questioned. The police could not investigate cases against them even if it was murder, looting or raping, as the military directive stated that complaints against Razakars or Peace Committee members were only to be investigated by military authorities. Thus developed the Peace Committee and Razakars, two parallel governments in East Pakistan; one was to some extent normal civil administration which soon approached complete impotence and collaborated with the army; the other, a regime of paid informers gangsters, thugs, answerable to no one and apparently above whatsoever law was left.¹¹

(1.4)The ‘Birangona’

The use of rape as a systematic effort to suppress the Bengali community by targeting women presented a different kind of threat. In war, the risk of death is a real threat but rape introduces another dimension to the systems of modern warfare wherein physical destruction of the

¹¹ Kalyan Chaudhuri, *Genocide in Bangladesh* (London: Orient Longman, 1972), 170.

members of a group does not fulfil the stated goal of eradication but mass rape reveals a way of destroying the enemy's identity. The ethnic nature of sexualized violence in the Liberation War of Bangladesh has been inscribed on women's bodies through rape, abuse and finally, childbirth. Contained within the patriarchal tradition, female modesty/honour/purity are common denominators which cut across all communities in South Asia. As her modesty signifies the masculinity of her community, the perpetrators frequently resort to the violation of the women of the 'Other' in a particular nationalistic discourse. Bina D'Costa suggests that:

In such an imagined world, gendered notions of culture and identity are intrinsically appropriated, with ideas of 'motherland' and its sons, 'mother tongue' and 'fertile soil' all carrying deeply gendered imageries. Framed by the metaphors of kinship, gendered imageries permeate everyday lives through locally institutionalized norms and cultural practices. They also produce an exclusivist approach towards others that could manifest in violent forms during communal riots or identity wars.¹²

While the genocide witnessed unspeakable cruelties, the rape of Bengali women was often a cold blooded attempt to impregnate women with the intention that they should be carriers of the seed of a Non-Bengali Muslim identity. While hundreds of Bengali women had been raped in the course of the army's rampage across the countryside, others were kept at army barracks and quarters and were recovered in naked, traumatized, lifeless states on the verge of mental derangement. The women recovered from these army camps were of varying age groups, mostly young, unmarried, found in advanced stages of pregnancy. The mental and physical state of most of them required intense medical and psychiatric care for rehabilitation. By December, a few thousand girls had been rescued by the Red Cross, Mukti Bahini and the allied forces. Although the official record noted that 200,000 had been raped in the nine months of conflict, the actual numbers cannot possibly be determined.

In the context of the Bangladesh Liberation War, the term 'birangona' had been coined as early as 23rd December, 1971 as it appeared in the national daily, *Purbodesh* to valorize the suffering of Bengali women, who were declared 'war heroines'. The Father of the Nation, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was particularly sympathetic towards the plight of the raped women, who he declared

¹² Bina D'Costa, *Nationbuilding, Gender and War Crimes in South Asia* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 38.

had made the ultimate sacrifice in securing the independence of Bangladesh. He personally pledged the resettlement of the 200,000 women dishonoured during the nine months of army brutality and gave them the title of 'birangona'.

The inbuilt hegemony in the construction of the title, however, indicates an attempt at creating a puritan state and the systematic glorification of victims through the media and state mechanism reveals the structural implementation of a strong gender bias. Despite the official process to recognize their suffering, the programme of reintegrating these women into society turned into a 'marry them off' campaign, which tragically misfired, with men demanding handsome dowries.

In a report published by *The Daily Star* on December 8, 2014, Marianne Scholte writes about the rehabilitation of the 'birangona' post 1971.

After the War of Liberation, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman pleaded with his countrymen to "give due honor and dignity to the women oppressed by the Pakistani army" -- by which he meant the hundreds of thousands of women who had been raped. Unfortunately, his pleas went largely unheeded, and countless women were driven from their homes and marginalised by society. Nevertheless, the unprecedented, nationwide programme that women leaders and Sheikh Mujib's government organised to aid war-affected women did effectively assist thousands of women and created new public space for women to work and live independently.¹³

Budrunnessa Ahmad, who became Bangladesh's first Minister of Education, spent much of her time during the war working in the refugee camps around Calcutta, attempting to assist the devastated Bangladeshi women who were arriving -- many had been raped and wounded; a significant number were pregnant. In Bangladesh, leaders of the East Pakistan Girl Guides Association had even been inside the Dhaka cantonment, where the Pakistani army had been holding women. The condition was desperate and pitiable but they were helpless considering the meagre resources available to them in a war-torn, ravaged country. However, at the end of the Liberation War, Budrunnessa Ahmad and poet, Begum Sufia Kamal, urgently mobilised a group of women to rescue the survivors.

¹³ Marianne Scholte, "Liberating the Women of 1971," *The Daily Star*, December, 8, 2014, <https://www.thedailystar.net/liberating-the-women-of-1971-54154>.

The Central Organization for Women's Rehabilitation (Kendrio Mohila Punorbashon Songstha) was officially inaugurated on January 7, 1972. Sufia Kamal was appointed the chairperson; Taslima Abed, a member of parliament, the treasurer, Shahera Ahmed from the Social Welfare Ministry, the secretary; Hajera Khatun worked as the matron of the home for rescued women.

The group met with the Minister for Home Affairs, and Relief and Rehabilitation, A.H.M. Kamaruzzaman, who offered extensive financial support and the use of two houses, Eskaton Road 20, which was used as the training centre and school, and Eskaton 88, which served as the rehabilitation home. The rescue operation -- a race against time, before the women committed suicide or were trafficked to brothels in Bangladesh, India, Pakistan or the Middle East -- continued for months as people from all quarters brought news of women needing assistance; branch offices were opened in all the districts with the assistance of local women and political leaders; many women came forward to offer comfort and support.

One of the first clinics for the victims was set up in Dhaka in January by the International Planned Parenthood Federation with an international team of doctors, headed by Dr. Malcolm Potts, a British physician. There were many who demanded an abortion at the risk of their life and health, the war babies who were born in these months following the conflict were placed for adoption through government and non-governmental agencies such as CARITAS, the International Roman Catholic relief organization led by Mother Teresa.

The politics of the 'birangona' discourse has been further explored in the later chapters through a detailed study of Nilima Ibrahim's 'Ami Birangona Bolchi' and other more recent collections of women's narratives of 1971. The issue of justice for the violation of human rights and war crimes has also been discussed in relation to how they have reshaped 'birangona' histories.

(1.5) Existing research and literary studies

The over personalization of memory by academics is associated with a number of theoretical moves some of which sit together uneasily. The rise of interest in memory is connected with the emphasis on trauma studies and with minority literature's quest to retrieve the memories of

groups whose histories had been previously neglected. As with the turn of psychoanalysis which preceded it, 'memory' promised to illuminate questions concerning the relation between the 'inside' of lived experience and the 'outside' of happenings. I would like to propose that memoirs provide knowledge not of the subjective experience itself, but of how memory or 'memorial consciousness' may be constructed with the help of socio historical frameworks or discourses. Memory may be aligned with the thoroughly social and material processes which are understood and interpreted by means of symbols and tropes that exist in the present. It produces and circulates experiences which provide cultural pathways of meaning. If we say that memory is an inner representation of the past, it must be remembered that memory not only mediates the past but is itself always mediated.

Memory is oriented towards needs and interests. It proceeds in an extremely selective and reconstructive manner. Paul Ricoeur mentions that it is possible that human memory 'overly' remembers some events at the expense of others. The production of a narrative depends upon the relationship between remembering and forgetting. He recognizes the necessity of forgetting because of the psychological discomfort caused by the recollection of certain events. It is this habitual avoidance which results in a proliferation of fictional representations of both history and personal memories. Memory shapes the way in which traumatic experiences are put into narrative form.

Memory acts as the tormented margin bordering memoirs written during periods of conflict, war, genocide and in its aftermath. In her book, *The Other Side of Silence*, Urvashi Butalia had observed that there was a 'serious gap' or omission of the experiences of Partition of women in Bengal and East Pakistan. Perhaps, a similar observation can be made in the context of the Liberation War of Bangladesh of 1971. The memoirs written by Bangladeshi women during this period seek to fill up a 'serious gap' in history and successfully represent a gendered perspective of 'the forgotten genocide' of 1971 as Gary J. Bass terms it.

Current scholarship on the Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971 has engendered a more socio-political, ethical inquiry into the sexuality of war and recent social anthropological research has made significant progress in profiling a third-world developing society grappling with the consequent impact of a Liberation War characterized by unprecedented gender violence. Susan Brownmiller in *Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Rape* (1993) offers an insightful study of

the history of South East Asian politics which led to the Liberation War of 1971, the sociology of rape and most importantly the inherent and ingrained inequality of men and women under the law. Female scholarship on the Bangladesh Liberation War has taken into account the involvement of women as activists and civilian victims to produce an alternative discourse which reveals the possibility of reconciliation to heal the wounds of war which are still festering today among those who experienced the war or its after effects. It has also simultaneously developed theoretical frameworks for writing about violence particularly in the context of South Asia and the nationalist movements which shaped the future of these young nations.

Bina D'Costa in her book, *Nationbuilding, Gender and War Crimes in South Asia* (2011) hinges on a critical feminist perspective in her analysis of the Liberation War of Bangladesh in 1971. She locates the gender issue as a construct of the state machinery and the conflict arising from the diverse nation building processes. The author critically re investigates the political turns which led to the rise of nationalism and how women were left vulnerable to war crimes such as rape under the statutes issued by the military junta in Pakistan and due to the involvement of the 'razakars'. The control of women and their sexuality as a tool of state sponsored violence was followed by the stigma and social exclusion of rape survivors where gender roles were further subscribed and perpetuated. The synchronic circulation of these memorial representations seem to have crossed boundaries of time, space and social groups and have been absorbed in the context of modern Bangladesh where gender discrimination persists.

The documentation of memory and wartime testimonies in Yasmin Saikia's *Women, War, and the Making of Bangladesh: Remembering 1971* (2011), attempts to initiate a dialogue between perpetrators and victims by interrogating both accounts. The focus shifts from a minute inquiry of the violence, assault and rape to the complex process of 'remembering'. The mediation and articulation of memory assumes critical importance as it often reveals an altered consciousness of war and violence. The 'object' of memory and the 'objective' of remembering is seen to be constantly shifting and the personal accounts collected in the book are often vicarious ones-the product of accumulated exposure to a common reservoir of public knowledge. Extensive archival research and nuanced interviews provide the basis for a humanistic framework which Saikia develops in conclusion while she acknowledges the possibilities and limits of mnemonic representation when it comes to memories of violent history, such as war, terror, and genocide.

Amena Mohsin's essay, "Silence and Marginality: Gendered Security and the Nation State" in, *Women, Security, South Asia: A Clearing in the Thicket* (2005) regards the modern state of Bangladesh as gendered. The essay refers closely to Ibrahim's *Ami Birangona Bolchi* as a conceptual back bone in its analysis of the gender bias which has framed narratives of nation construction post the Liberation War of 1971. Mohsin provides a detailed overview of the legislative laws made by the new State for the protection of women but considers them to be legal anomalies when faced with societal and cultural values. The 'marry-off' campaign providing safe custody to women victims by means of a state sponsored rehabilitation programme is perceived as a contradiction to the system of beliefs and collective emotions, rendering women vulnerable to the political trappings of a government desperately attempting to erase the scars of war crime. The author examines the question of security and marginality by introducing case studies which reflect upon the history of mentalities and trace the position of women in Bangladesh to present times.

Nayanika Mookherjee's *The Spectral Wound: Sexual Violence, Public Memories and the War of Bangladesh 1971* (2015), comments extensively on the circulation of public memories and the Left Liberal politics affecting the documentation of public memories of rape. She visualizes Bangladesh as a country of lack and excess, which fragments the collective experience of genocide by forming enumerative communities-3 million killed, 200,000 raped. The term 'birangona' is critically investigated as being emblematic of the heroism of the women victims but also containing within itself the stigma and shame associated with rape. Public memory and secrecy is perceived as an interplay of cognitive and social phenomena which causes revelation and repression to occur at the same juncture. Media representations of war victims in a state of physical and mental disarray detached from individuals and embodied only in media and institutions flatten the diversity of experiences these women had to encounter during the war.

The Ain o Shalish Kendra (Centre for Law and Mediation) in Bangladesh has made a remarkable effort in documenting the narratives of women from 1971 through their oral history project. It is a national legal aid and human rights organization, established in 1986, which provides legal and social support to the disempowered, particularly women, children and workers. In 2001, the Ain o Shalish Kendra (ASK) published a volume of 22 stories, *Narir Ekattor o Juddhoporoborti Kothokahini*, which recorded the experiences of women who had

been systematically raped and tortured by the Pakistan army and their collaborators. They were not only victims of sexual violence but women in the front lines of the popular resistance against the occupying army. In 2013, the ASK produced an English translation titled, *Rising from the Ashes: Women Narratives of 1971*. This book unites different modes of remembering by compiling a series of interviews collected from women who were victims of war crimes. The quality and meaning of the past assumes a kaleidoscopic dimension as the traumatic experience is narrated by the speakers, who engage in a process of conversational remembering. The trauma is seemingly engraved in the victim's memory and the concept of traumatic dissociative amnesia fails as the accounts reveal a surprising vividness and clarity. The interviews are gathered from a wide cross section of the affected community causing a democratic consolidation of memory and necessitating a political and social integration of former victims and perpetrators alike. These verbal elaborations and conscious remembrances are structured on the basis of the cognitive schemata which is culturally determined to a great extent. The victims remember their life 'before' and 'after' the event and the communicative self descriptions are directed by their emotions, needs and social conditioning.

Salma Sobhan, who was the co-founder of the Ain o Shalish Kendra (ASK) in Bangladesh and served as its Executive Director from 1986- 2001, comments on the inherent contradiction of attitudes towards the legal rights of women in Bangladesh following the Liberation War of 1971, in her book, *Legal Status of Women in Bangladesh* (1978). The pre-independence legislation in Bangladesh was modeled on a mixture of colonial and religious legal structures which was practiced in West Pakistan. According to Sobhan, the legal status of women in Bangladesh before 1971, could necessarily predict the nature of legal justice served to them in the wake of the Liberation War. The implementation of these laws inevitably placed women in a relatively weaker position than men. The Liberation War of 1971 which led to the creation of independent Bangladesh and a secular democratic state presented as a peculiar challenge to the practise of law in the country since the newly framed Constitution had to take into consideration pre-existing penal codes, civil and criminal procedures, and acts. Sobhan argues that the current legal practices towards the protection of women rights and liberties are mostly dissatisfactory since the system failed to deliver its promise in the initial stages. She cites examples in support of her argument by documenting the systematic rape of women over a period of nine months by the Pakistani Army in an attempt to make 'Muslims' out of 'Bengalis'. Lists of names and numbers

collected at rape camps by rescue workers were deliberately destroyed by the post war government in 1972 and successively in 1985-86 in an attempt to evade the task of delivering legal justice to the victims. The destruction of legal evidence may also be interpreted as a deliberate erasure of public memory. The distortion of legal jurisprudence has therefore shaped the whole sociological formulation by removing cognitive traces and creating a condition of synchronized amnesia.

In the context of Bangladesh, the pivotal role of the intellectual or historian is riddled with a paradox which has problematized the meeting point of the politically radical with the objective critical voice. To illuminate the crisis of institutionality it is important to bring into discussion a work such as *Dead Reckoning: Memories of the 1971 Bangladesh War* by Sarmila Bose.

Naeem Mohaiemen points out some of the concerns with Bose's account of the events of 1971 in his article titled, "Another Reckoning"

Her critics include scholars of gender violence during conflict (Urvashi Butalia), authors of academic books on 1971 and rape (Nayanika Mookherjee, Yasmin Saikia), authors of two forthcoming books on 1971 (Srinath Raghavan, Salil Tripathi), author of a definitive history of Bangladesh (Willem Van Schendel, who questioned her "professional and ethical standards"), and an eyewitness (Akhtaruzzaman Mandal), Arnold Zeitlin (head of Pakistan bureau of AP in 1971) queried why she did no surveys of non-voters to establish her "support" thesis. Gita Sahgal (producer of a documentary on 1971 war crimes) has pointed out how *razakars* were dismissed in the book. Richard Cash (author of decades of pre- and post-1971 public health research in Bangladesh) disputes her death toll methodology and has pointed in this respect, to the research published in *Population Studies*, on the impact of the war on births and deaths.¹⁴

Dina Siddiqi, a specialist on gender and Islam in Bangladesh, and researcher for Ain o Salish Kendra, which produced an extensive study on raped women in the years after 1971, has analyzed how framing and context setting are critical to the production of historical "truths", and therefore Bose's silences and omissions are significant.

¹⁴ Naeem Mohaiemen, "Another Reckoning," *Economic and Political Weekly* 46, no. 53 (December 2011): 79.

As a leading intellectual, Bose's work is even more problematic since these strands in her writing play a central role in giving credence and substance to particular assumptions about the aims, bases and politics of the Bangladesh Liberation War. There is a tension between the academic voice and 'the people' which it seeks to represent. Naeem Mohaiemen writes on Bose, "About the singular focus on Pakistani army officer testimonies, she says, "army officers were the people on the ground on the regime side whose experiences I needed to chronicle." Actually, there were numerous civilian Pakistanis who also served the war regime."¹⁵ There is a potentially crippling vacuity which haunts the inherent rhetoric of activism in Bose's work. The possibility of finding an adequate conceptual and historical framework for the events of the Bangladesh Liberation War is shut off by the concentration on hegemonic and exclusionary nationalism in Bose's work.

Naeem Mohaiemen states, "Bose has not been singled out because she attacks tropes of nationalism...No, she is criticized for sloppy research, faulty methodology, absent framing and partisan interviews."¹⁶

The downplaying of war crimes such as rape in Bose's work posits a dilemma which is more politicized and ideologically complex than the gross statistical miscalculation. Bose's claims that 'allegations' of rape and genocide by the Pakistani army were exaggerated by India and Bangladesh are potentially the source of a kind of false consciousness, which may be disseminated through the intellectually radical voice. In an article for EPW (Economic and Political Weekly), "Losing the Victims: Problems of Using Women as Weapons in Recounting the Bangladesh War", published on September, 22, 2007, Sarmila Bose writes about the nature of sexual violence during the 1971 Bangladesh War, in as Akhtaruzzaman Mandal observes, "a totally outrageous manner, offending the sensibilities of the victims."¹⁷

"The available evidence confirms the occurrence of rape but does not support the claims of hundreds of thousands of women were raped by the army in East Pakistan in 1971. The seven case studies in Nilima Ibrahim's book, the opportunistic rapes admitted by the army and the

¹⁵ Naeem Mohaiemen, "Another Reckoning," *Economic and Political Weekly* 46, no. 53 (December 2011): 80.

¹⁶ Ibid., 80.

¹⁷ Akhtaruzzaman Mandal, "Research on Bangladesh War," *Economic and Political Weekly* 42, no. 50 (December 2007): 32.

reports of massacres of Non-Bengali (West Pakistani and Bihari) men, women and children by Bengalis, suggest that several thousand women may have been victims of sexual violence in 1971.”¹⁸

“The available material shows that the victims of rape were Hindu and Muslim, Bihari and West Pakistani. The perpetrators were civilian and military, and also Bengali, Bihari and West Pakistani. Pakistan army officers admit to the occasional opportunistic rape or attempted rape of women, Bengali and West Pakistani, by army personnel.”¹⁹

It is important to note the use of the word ‘opportunistic’ in Bose’s report of the circumstances of rape and sexual violence in 1971. Bose chooses to emphasize that the rapes committed by the Pakistani army were ‘opportunistic’ rather than a planned policy of mass intimidation which took the form of unprecedented sexual brutality. Bina D’Costa in an interview with Geoffrey Davis, who worked as a physician in Bangladesh immediately after the war, quotes his testimony,

Some of the stories told to us were appalling. Being raped again and again by large Pathan soldiers. You couldn’t believe that anybody would do that! All the rich and pretty ones were kept for the officers and all the other ones were distributed among the other ranks. And the women had it really tough. They did not get enough to eat. When they got sick, they got no treatment. A lot of them died in those camps. There was an air of disbelief about the whole thing...but the evidence clearly showed that it did happen.²⁰

The issue which Sarmila Bose’s work illustrates is the lack of integration of ‘authentic’ victim voices in the framing of a historical account. The misapplication of critical and analytical tools on the part of the cultural critic pierces the specificity of the testimonies of real victims causing them to disintegrate into vague generalizations.

¹⁸ Sarmila Bose, “Losing the Victims: Problems of Using Women as Weapons in Recounting the Bangladesh War,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 42, no. 38 (September 22, 2007): 387.

¹⁹ Ibid., 387.

²⁰ Bina D’Costa, “Birangona: Bearing Witness in War and ‘Peace’,” in *Of the Nation Born: The Bangladesh Papers*, ed. Amena Mohsin and Hameeda Hossain (New Delhi: Zubaan Publishers, 2016), 84.

Contrary to the integration of the perpetrators' personal accounts within a historical narrative, the integration of the victims' experiences of trauma lacks almost any synthetic, analytic or conceptual framework. They are simply present punctuating the narrative and waiting to be gathered. While the perpetrators have a narrative and a history, the victims have only experiences and voices. The role of the researcher thus becomes even more critical in finding the value of these testimonies and conveying them to the larger public.

Evidently, there is a need to further explore the memoirs written by activists such as Nilima Ibrahim, Begum Sufia Kamal, Jahanara Imam and numerous other unnamed women, who have contributed to this literature through their testimonies and narratives in order to assess the complex intersections of trauma, memory and history. Within the context of postcolonial feminist research, this area can yield an interesting insight into the development of the modern state with its predominantly masculine ideology which governs process of history-making, often conspiring to exclude the trauma and violence experienced by women in order to create a mythic, homogeneous, narrative of nation-building.

(1.6)Methodology

While this is, to an extent, an interdisciplinary thesis, it would be prudent to state from the outset that my training is not in history nor in sociology, but in English Literature and women's writings. The present work will require extensive ethnographic research and a critical engagement with the emerging discipline of memory and trauma studies. By conducting interviews and discussions, the research will focus on post conflict lives and the contemporary discourse on the 'birangona' which has developed over the past years. The complex realities of trauma which emerged in the period after the crisis with the emergence of judicial activism and the establishment of the International Crimes Tribunal (ICT) will also be evident through the research in terms of assessing its impact on public memory.

I am interested in interrogating the gaps in public representation and the limitations of official state-sponsored histories of the Bangladesh Liberation War, what these representations reveal

about their authors and strategic location, what assumptions circumscribe these texts (that is, the cultural parameters within which they operate and the intellectual axes they are drawn on) and therefore it has been necessary to conduct a discursive study of the socio-political circumstances and historical complications leading to the conflict and the kind of ideological perspectives it has engendered in terms of the historical writing.

My approach towards the primary texts I have chosen also does not proceed from the aim of proving a single, overarching argument but rather ask them a multitude of questions in order to derive a sense of the intersections of memory and history which occur in these texts and to understand the contradictions between the grand history of nation building and the micro-histories of loss and trauma which constantly resist assimilation within the broader hegemonic discourse. Given that I seek to question grand narratives that foist private narratives and memoirs, it would be fair to claim that my method overall is poststructuralist.

The process of collecting data and information had made it necessary for me to spend considerable time in Bangladesh and engaging in field work. I visited Dhaka and Khulna in December, 2019 and spent ten days visiting parts of the capital and the town talking to people who I had contacted earlier for interviews. The interviews are rich contributions to the numerous archives of oral testimonies which are constantly in the process of being created and expanded. One of the limitations of this form of data collection which relies on orality and is prone to the unreliability of memory is that it is ill-equipped to verify the truth or validity of a given statement. Finding definitive answers to questions is often difficult since the responses of the interviewee cannot be predicted or regulated and emotions often cloud clear judgement of incidents that are retold. However, the interviews provide an alternative paradigm of analysis and these recollections are integral to the study of memory which provides the theoretical basis for this research.

CHAPTER 2 : THE SYMBOLIC BODY AND THE RHETORIC OF POWER: CONCEPTIONS OF SUBJECTIVITY

This chapter seeks develop on Foucault's idea of power and the spectacle of punishment in modern societies. Foucault's view on the new regimes of power and the politics of death is applied to critically investigate the genocide in Bangladesh. This chapter will elaborate on the operations of power on the body politic and on the individual. The critical idea explored here is that the body of the 'birangona' acted as a site of contestation and control in the nationalist struggle and ensuing ethnic conflict. The discourse on the body is essential for our understanding of the effects of sexual violence and trauma on the 'birangona'. This chapter will also provide a theoretical framework to interpret how bodily experiences of rape are embedded in memory and expressed through the narratives of women survivors.

By the close of the twentieth century, the body had become a key site of political, social, cultural and economic intervention. In recent years, the body has come to be recognized as a contested terrain on which struggles over control and resistance are fought out in contemporary societies. The inclusion of the body in sociological inquiry may be regarded as a critical and reflective response to the social changes which have brought the body to the forefront of contemporary struggle and debate. Its intellectual roots are diverse, although post-structuralism and feminism can claim to be at its core; and Nietzsche and the critique of Cartesian dualism its most notable theoretical model in phenomenological thought.

The following discussion seeks to elaborate on Foucault's discussion on the 'body' and the development of a specific epistemological system which has been critical in terms of understanding how the human body operates as a living entity in sociological thought and the ways in which it may be inscribed within literary discourses. The purpose of this section is to provide a framework of interpretation for the study of the 'birangona' politics in the history of the Bangladesh Liberation War. The lived experiences of the 'birangona' or the war heroine provide a critical paradigm for applying the research which has been conducted on the body and conceptions of subjectivity.

In the opening pages of Foucault's *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, there is a graphic description of the torture and death of Damiens on the charges of regicide in 1757. This is followed by an analysis of the structure and timetable of a prison house eighty years later. Foucault's aim is to chart the disappearance of the public spectacle of punishment and its replacement at the end of the eighteenth century with a modern penal system in which punishment is hidden behind prison walls.

On 2 March 1757 Damiens the regicide was condemned 'to make the amende honourable before the main door of the Church of Paris', where he was to be 'taken and conveyed in a cart, wearing nothing but a shirt, holding a torch of burning wax weighing two pounds'; then 'in a said cart, to the Place de Greve, where, on a scaffold that will be erected there, the flesh will be torn from his breasts, arms, thighs, and calves with red-hot pincers, his right hand, holding the knife with which he committed parricide, burnt with sulphur, and, on those places where the flesh will be torn away, poured molten lead, boiling oil, burning resin, wax and sulphur melted together and then his body drawn and quartered by four horses and his limbs and body consumed by fire, reduced to ashes and his ashes thrown to the winds.'²¹

The introductory anecdote describing the conviction of Robert-Francois Damiens also reveals an interesting duality in the discussion of the body of the 'condemned' man. The assumption of Classical positivist sociology of death as a natural and sanctified termination of life and the idea of death as a means of delivering a theatre of punishment are juxtaposed to indicate radical shifts in the modern understanding of the body. The question of legal and political justice further complicates this issue by blurring the distinction. Death of the body appears insufficient to the crime committed, the elaborate nature of the torture mechanism reinforces the fact that the body must be exposed to worse horrors before meeting its end. There seems to be a calm acceptance of death and torture among the audience gathered for the public execution since the crime associated with it naturally calls for capital punishment. The act of regicide demands death: it is an accepted norm. The physical torture is therefore legitimized and perceived as desirable. The gruesome condemnation becomes in process a natural death which is normative and socially

²¹ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Penguin, 1977), 3.

approved. “It was as if the punishment was thought equal, if not to exceed, in savagery the crime itself, to accustom the spectators to a ferocity from which one wished to divert them.”²²

. The cruelty and effectiveness of bodily punishment is investigated by Foucault as he traces the evolution of the victim-executioner dialectic to recent times. The idea of legal violence and shame are wedged together and the notion of scandal and light are distributed differently. The sympathy extended towards the man facing punishment transforms him from his position as criminal to that of the sufferer. The mechanism of torture and the severity of physical pain draw the legal system under a shadow of ruthlessness and guilt as opposed to the criminal.

A gradual rationalization of crime and punishment emerges with time as the penal system becomes more aligned to a corrective principle than a retributive one. The body as if loses its pre-eminence and is no longer viewed as an available organ for delivering physical penalties. There seems to be a rational reason driving this change, one that recognizes the nature of human pain as not entirely physical but largely psychological. A network of ‘constraints, and privations, obligations and prohibitions’ is brought into effect and the delivery of legal justice is looked upon as a more benign and reasonable process. The execution of the criminal also undergoes a significant change with the introduction of science in the understanding of human anatomy.

The role of the executioner is modified with “warders, doctors, chaplains, psychiatrists, psychologists, educationalists”²³ facilitating a painless death. The mind of the condemned is brought under control with tranquilizers and almost made comfortable to meet its end. The death of the body follows in a swift and imperceptible manner. The sharp reduction in the number of capital punishments and public executions reveal a shift in the treatment of the body of the condemned man. The privacy accorded to the dying man not only indicates a new morality emerging in the system of legal justice but also makes death a ‘private’ affair which must be kept out of the public gaze. The body is drawn into a discourse on morality, where death is associated with sobriety and dignity. To conclude one might state that the body gradually disappears from

²² Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Penguin, 1977), 9.

²³ Ibid., 11.

the realm of punitive action and the condemned becomes a bodiless reality. The body has been appropriated into a scientific, psychological and ethical discourse which has caused a shift in power relations and allowed us to review the materiality of the body as an instrument and vector of power.

Referring to the execution of Robert-Francois Damiens on the charge of regicide, Foucault traces the history of punishment which is rooted in a systematic discourse on the mechanisms of power operational on the body. The sovereign power or the 'body' of the king was directed towards the dispensation of justice where the law of the sovereign was applied to cause a total submission of the public body. Criminality was determined by the sovereign and punishment was a means of reinforcing and strengthening power. The decision of life and death rested upon his performance of power. Foucault attributes this loss of the right over life and death to 'the power of the sword'.

In its modern application, Foucault observes an attempt to reconcile the art of government with the theory of sovereignty by legitimizing certain aspects of sovereign power. New forms of knowledge allow this otherwise tense transformation and Foucault reasons that an emerging mercantilism in modern societies changes the different elements, dimensions and factors of power within a state. A shift in political thought and in the analyses of political power appeared as a positive outcome in the inordinately vast, abstract and rigid framework of sovereign power and the individual body was once again assumed into the principal domain of intervention and control. The manipulation of the body to render it both 'useful and docile' was achieved through the reconfiguration of absolute sovereign power into a 'disciplinary' power which sought to extract time and labour from individual bodies rather than commodities and wealth.

The nature of sovereign power has not undergone a significant change but the modes of expression have altered radically. The individual is no longer told what he is forbidden to do but the powers of discipline and regulation create a sense of expectation and calculated management to dictate exclusive power of life and death over the individual body. Foucault contests the idea of power as relentlessly managing the details of life, administering its processes and manipulating its circumstances by introducing the idea of death in modernity. "Death is outside the power relationship," he claimed, "[it] is beyond the reach of power, [for] power has a grip on

it only in general, overall, or statistical terms.”²⁴ Damiens’ execution may have been a glorious display of the totality of sovereign power but in contrast modern death assures the moment of the individual’s escape from power. It is the most secret and private aspect of existence.

Exploring the issue of power and the body, Foucault also remarked on the relations of power between the social body and ‘one’s own body’. Power according to Foucault resides in the space of the body. The care of the body causes an investment of power in the self but once power produces this effect it faces a counter attack from the same. Foucault envisions an ongoing struggle for power which causes bodies to enter into a state of conflict. He elaborates by providing the example of social bodies (constituting of doctors and politicians) expressing their acute concern about the idea of non legalized co-habitation or free abortion. The individual body thus appropriates power and manifests itself in ways which may be counteractive to the hegemonized modes and practices of the social body. The tussle continues because power is constantly being relocated and reinvested elsewhere. Foucault explains this further by stating that the problem of the body is connected to the growing political and social struggle. The body cannot be left out of any discourse which relates to a bourgeois society with a political consciousness primarily because the exercise of power is tangible and material through its many agencies.

Although over a period of time Foucault observes a shift in the nature of power vested in the body from being cumbersome and heavy to loose and flexible, he recognizes the need to refashion the body according to the changing needs of society. Foucault thus proposes an ideological perspective where the body is perceived as a free agent open to the influences of power and not merely a physical site upon which power operates. Power produces a self knowledge or ‘knowing’ and forms fluid, reversible and unstable relationships with other forms of knowledge. Dissociation from other power structures and complex networks of relationships becomes a theoretical impossibility as the body with its individual sense of being comes to realize the mechanisms of power which originate from it and exercise control over it. Foucault’s emphasis on knowledge stems from an essentially modernist perspective of the body being

²⁴ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Penguin, 1977), 11.

subjugated through the diverse mechanisms of exercising power. The drive to obtain knowledge of the individual body and of others is fuelled by the desire to achieve productive control over the body. Thus, in the modern era, Foucault perceives the development in human sciences: psychology, sociology, medicine, criminology as a means of exercising both individualizing and totalizing techniques of power on the body. Our basic conception of the body is shaped by these disciplines and we seek a form of self-definition through them. The body is thus transformed from being merely a product of nature to being a product of knowledge and power.

Foucault's notion of death and biopower may be applied in genocide cultures to understand the relationship between sovereign power and the body. Foucault's idea of 'biopower' signalled a more expansionary model of power. This new mechanism of power had very specific procedures and completely new instruments than the traditional deductive model of sovereign power. According to Foucault, "This new mechanism of power applies directly to bodies and what they do rather than to the land and what they produce". Power appears not to limit but to provoke, reinforce and disseminate force for the purposes of management and control, ramified throughout all areas of life. In this model of power, the expansion and efficiency of life, not its deduction becomes the primary function of power. Death, in and of itself, is anathema to a system of life. "Death is power's limit, the moment that escapes it" Death therefore must become strictly instrumental, a sometime necessity in the service of life, a purgation of impurity or threat. Foucault called this new form of power, 'biopower'.

The idea of sovereignty may, at first, be challenged since there are external forces involved in the attempt to commit genocide. While the genocide in Bangladesh was often represented by the perpetrators as part of a civil war, a war between armed factions within the country, in reality, the West Pakistani government was considered foreign and viewed with distrust by the people. The question of sovereignty was raised in 1968 as the Bengalis saw the celebration of the Ayub regime's decade in power as facetious and recognized the tightly controlled system of representation invented by the military, named 'Basic Democracy' as ineffective. The call for political autonomy was implicit in Sheikh Mujibur's Six-Point Demand (1966) and was later reiterated in his declaration of Independence on 7th March, 1971. Sheikh Mujibur's speech evoked two meanings of independence by promoting constitutionalism and a freedom struggle. Despite its ambiguity, however, this landmark speech, inspired a popular revolution, whose force

and organization came from outside the halls of constitutional politics and quickly generated numerous unambiguous declarations of national sovereignty, completely rejecting the idea of a united 'Pakistan' and turning the source of sovereign authority from the state to the people.

Secondly, the extermination of the indigenous group was systematically conducted in the nine month conflict and the exercise of sovereign power over the body entailed the "killing of members of the group", "causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group", and "deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part"²⁵. "The basic biological features of the human species became the object of a political strategy"²⁶ as the genocide involved the use of technologies of annihilation and torture directed towards the physical body. The purpose of ethnic cleansing had a distinctly political impetus linked to the perpetuation of a cultural and racial identity as well as the continued occupation of the territory. The body was brought under the control of the sovereign power through acts of physical punishment and ultimately the mutilation of the body. On the night of 25 March the Pakistani military began its crackdown, named 'Operation Searchlight'. Two reporters, Simon Dring of the *Daily Telegraph* (London) and Howard Whitten of AAP-Reuters, who were in Dhaka at the time of the crackdown and were expelled from Pakistan after the genocide began on 25 March, reported that "In the name of God and a united Pakistan, Dacca is a crushed and frightened city."²⁷

The massacre of students and intellectuals indicates that the purpose of punishment had less to do with its justification in law and more from the way in which it was embedded in a matrix of power relations. The punitive tactic was developed into a spectacle of death and performed in the public domain to incite fear and suppress the popular support for the Liberation War. Death in genocide societies re-emerges in the public consciousness through images of mutilation and torture. The idea of solitary death is reconstructed. It is not restricted to the private space as Foucault argues but appears through public spectacles of bodies destroyed by the total force of

²⁵ United Nation, "Article II: Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide. Adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations on 9 December 1948", *United Nations Treaty Series 1021*, 78(i), 280 <https://treaties.un.org/doc/publication/unts/volume%2078/volume-78-i-1021-english.pdf>, 280.

²⁶ Ibid., 280.

²⁷ Simon Dring, "Dacca, City of the Dead," *Daily Telegraph*, March 30, 1971, www.genocidebangladesh.org.

sovereign power. The self is therefore determined not simply by its relation to its death but by the death of the other. The sheer scale of fatalities effects a qualitative change in the individual's own relationship to mortality and intensifies the bodily awareness of death. Basanti Guhathakurta in her memoir, *Ekattorer Smriti*, recalls the mass murder of students at Jagannath College and the physical reminders of death:

Just past the college gate at the left is the principal's living quarters and behind the garden is a row of newly built two-storied buildings. We retraced our footsteps to the bottom of the staircase there. The man led us to the room, which had popularly come to be called "the red room". We took the narrow verandah facing the south. There was no lock on the door. With one push of his hand, he opened the door. It was a big room, a few benches and high benches littered across it. There was blood on the floor, on the benches and the high benches had blood splattered on top. The most horrifying scene was where some hapless victim must have been pierced by a bayonet and the blood gushing from his heart sprinkled high on the eastern walls. The walls all around bore witness to this gory incident, the stains appearing like sparklers in the night. At some point it had trickled down slowly against the walls and onto the high benches from where it clotted in a thick mass on the floor. It was not possible for us to remain there much longer. A silence-filled terror struck us. But even so, our guide, Malati's father, kept on saying, "Look apa, this must be where they dragged the bodies through the door onto the narrow corridor and staircase." We saw the one-foot wide brush mark of blood gradually thinning out as it reached the stairs. Our knees started to crumble. Our guide must have had more stories to tell. We did not ask him, we *could* not ask him, and the stories remained untold. A silence enfolded us as we got into our car. The man put his palms together to say farewell. My head was spinning, my throat parched. I tried to wet my mouth with my spit. It was only on reaching Suraiya's house that I could regain my strength with a cup of hot tea.²⁸

In the context of Bangladesh, rape became an instrument of physical torture and controlling or blocking a woman's ability to bear children – one way of contributing to the destruction of the ethnic/racial group. The destruction of physical integrity marked the women survivors of the genocide as 'birangonas' or war heroines. Like his famous *Discipline and Punish* descriptions of

²⁸ Basanti Guhathakurta, *Ekattorer Smriti* (Dhaka: University Press Limited, 1991), 145-6.

the scaffold spectacle and the execution of Damians, in *The Punitive Society* (2015), Foucault gives more emphasis to actions involving the actual body: “expose, mark, wound, amputate, make a scar, leave a sign on the face or the shoulder and visible handicap, torture; in short, seize the body and inscribe on it the marks of power”²⁹. The course summary of *The Punitive Society* may have left some room for metaphor in the idea of ‘wounding’ or ‘hurting’ (*blessing*), but in the full lecture course a broader concept of marking becomes more obvious as he emphasizes both “actual and virtual marking”³⁰. The mark, which is also “some- thing like a trace”³¹, may be left on the body itself or on the status of the person. Thus, it includes not only amputating the hand of the thief but also exposing the face at the pillory.

Moreover, if power cannot seize the actual body, it may nevertheless mark its reputation, “inflict a symbolic stain”³² on its name, on its character. Memory and recognition are important here: the mark amounts to a “kind of monument to shame and infamy”³³. Punitive action does not restore relations as in the compensation tactic, where it is possible to forget the offence, but is a permanent scar that cannot escape memory. In a dual way, the mark reflects both the offence and an imprint of power - in this case, for Foucault, sovereign power. Thus, ‘actual’ marking refers to physical imprints on the body, while ‘virtual’ marking refers to a mark on the image, in the most general sense, of the individual. The exhibition of the body in the pillory, leaving aside any action of the crowd on the actual body, is its presentation to the visual gaze, which Foucault here calls ‘virtual’ because the ‘mark’ works at the level of reputation, status and memory alone. Through the gaze, marking attacks the figure of the person and then circulates in the social figuration of status.

The Foucauldian example of the direct gaze may be applied to the spectacle of violence and death which the genocide produced. These visible or actual marks were inscribed upon the body and often publicly perceived through the mass killing grounds exposing the countless dead. The

²⁹ Michel Foucault, *The Punitive Society: Lectures at the College de France 1972-1973*, ed. Bernard E. Harcourt, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 248.

³⁰ Ibid., 248.

³¹ Ibid., 248.

³² Ibid., 256.

³³ Ibid., 256.

punitive image of the raped woman was gradually transformed to assume an honorific quality. The concept of the virtual wound extends to the ‘birangona’, where the stain becomes symbolic as it shifts from the register of the iconic to affect social status and become inscribed in memory. The ‘birangona’ who is physically marked by rape reflects the ‘virtual’ wound which is momentarily gazed upon but immediately shifted to a symbolic order. By looking more closely at the punitive tactic of marking in its actual and virtual forms, we open up different perspectives on what Foucault regarded as the ‘history of bodies’ in *Discipline and Punish*, where, as well as considering the forces of modernity - particularly the body’s “constitution as labour power” - he speaks more generally about how, in the political field, various power relations may be invested in the body to “mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs”.³⁴ His observations on marking in *The Punitive Society* expand these possibilities, allowing the consideration of a punitive tactic that involves the body in a realm of virtual performance and signification. Notwithstanding important debates over whether there has been a broader punitive turn in the last century, it is quite possible to argue that punishment was already caught up in a modern society of spectacle during the genocide. In this case, Foucault’s evocations of the spectacle of the ‘ancient regime’ scaffold is more resonant than his sober descriptions of modern penitentiary.

(2.1) The effect of violence and trauma on the body: in the context of narratives and memoirs of genocide

On the basis of this theoretical discussion on the human body and sovereign power, I will attempt to develop upon the idea of the ‘mutilated’ or ‘raped’ female body in relation to the figure of the ‘birangona’ or ‘war heroine’ which appears in the corpus of genocide memoirs written by women during the Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971. The need to explore these

³⁴ Michel Foucault, *The Punitive Society: Lectures at the College de France 1972-1973*, ed. Bernard E. Harcourt, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 25-26.

texts arises primarily because they seek to discuss subjective bodily experiences of rape and dismemberment and focus upon the psychological effects of trauma which are intimately involved with the violence on the body. These memoirs may be critically examined to understand the clinical dimensions of trauma which transform the body and the effect of a catastrophic event such as the genocide on individual and public consciousness.

The female body associated with the private space is drawn into culture's grip where it is culturally inscribed and historically located. The memories of trauma, rape, violence and dislocation are mediated by constructs, associations and images of a cultural nature which ensure that their literature moves beyond the more subtle levels of nostalgia and subjectivity to reproduce a continuing pain of dismemberment. These memoirs therefore serve as a 'triumph' of memory. The immediacy and ferocity of violence convey the startling uncertainties and unforeseen turn of events during this period. The female body becomes the locus of critical attention as these memoirs record a distinctly bodily or physical experience rather than an overtly intellectual one. Ian Hacking in his essay titled, "Memory Sciences, Memory Politics", states that the "body and the memory struggle with each other for control over the individual, like the bean plants at the top of the apex, each twisting for the other's light, trying to put the other in the shade."³⁵

The relationship between psychology and physiology is perceived as symbiotic. Hacking traces the birth of the psychology laboratory (which began with Wundt and Fechner) to demonstrate how the inauguration of the institutional frame of experimental psychology relied heavily upon "investigations into the relationships between body and mind." Psychology "patterned itself on the study of the body. Its domain and its model was anatomy." However, developing on the theory provided by Danziger, Hacking observes that "although experimental psychology began as physiology, it increasingly became a statistical science"³⁶ preoccupied with classification of individuals and creating norms which could be statistically determined.

The individual memory continually evades any attempts at classification and remains largely ingrained in the human body awaiting inscription by culture. It is a dynamic entity which both

³⁵ Ian Hacking, "Memory Sciences, Memory Politics," in *Tense Past: Cultural Essays in Trauma and Memory*, ed. Paul Antze and Michael Lambek (New York: Routledge, 1996), 75.

³⁶ Ibid., 75.

influences and is influenced by the socio cultural structures surrounding it. For women, memory is associated with and largely confined to a life centered on the body. Hacking reflects on how systematic violence shapes the body and is embedded in the more subtle levels of memory and nostalgia. Physical trauma or sexual abuse which memory suppresses and forgets is often buried in our consciousness, engraved in visual scenes or felt in our bodies. Memory recovers the bodily experience through flashbacks or sudden recollections. The attention to the body becomes crucial in trauma studies since trauma is often interpreted in terms of medical pathology.

“Trauma means wound (a cut, lesion, or break in the body produced by an outside force or agent). The word “trauma” was not a word of common English when it was in the hands of surgeons treating mutilated soldiers; it was one of those fancy words that lay people don’t use, and often do not even understand. But now “traumatic experience” and all the rest are standard English.”³⁷

The word ‘trauma’ has also alternatively been associated with cruel or painful experiences which may be purely psychological. The transfer of trauma from the physical to the psychological was consolidated by 1885. However, it was perceived as an aberration which brought into focus the distinction between the ‘normal and ‘abnormal’. The body which has experienced physical or psychological trauma is transferred to the domain of the ‘abnormal’ because it is pathologically treated as diseased or not healthy. As trauma enters psychology through anatomy, the body becomes the central to the treatment of it and contains within it the possibility of recovery.

In memoirs of the genocide, violence and trauma operate on the body to produce memory. The distinction between body and consciousness is blurred and abstracted into a discourse on the lived experiences of physical trauma and material loss. The ‘fact’ of the body dictates the remembrance of the human tragedy. Returning to my discussion on the disabled or mutilated female body, I would like to refer to the idea of sexual violation, abuse or rape as a mechanism of systematic violence in the Liberation War of 1971. The use of rape as a consciously applied and sanctioned form of epistemic violence was launched as a tool of genetic imperialism and

³⁷ Ian Hacking, “Memory Sciences, Memory Politics,” in *Tense Past: Cultural Essays in Trauma and Memory*, ed. Paul Antze and Michael Lambek (New York: Routledge, 1996), 75.

ethnic cleansing in Bangladesh, claiming between two and four hundred thousand victims including minors.

Susan Brownmiller in her book, *Against Our Will: Men Women and Rape* writes:

An Asian relief secretary of the World Council of Churches called a press conference in Geneva to discuss his two week mission to Bangladesh. The Reverend Kentaro Buma reported that more than 200,000 Bengali women had been raped by Pakistani soldiers during the nine-month conflict, a figure that had been supplied to him by the Bangladesh authorities in Dacca. Thousands of the raped women had become pregnant, he said. And by tradition, no Moslem husband would take back a wife who had been touched by another man, even if she had been subdued by force. "The new authorities of Bangladesh are trying their best to break that tradition," Buma informed the newsmen. Eighty percent of the raped women were Moslems, reflecting the population of Bangladesh, but Hindu and Christian women were not exempt.³⁸

It may be mentioned here that many women were not only raped, they were often forced into sexual slavery, their bodies parts were ripped off, their sexual organs mutilated and bayoneted and the naked dead bodies piled in mass graves. The gender-selective atrocities and abuses notably sexual assault and gang rape were hinged on the body and primarily aimed at achieving the purpose of political destabilization. In genocide communities, the female body becomes aggressively drawn into the sphere of communal politics and is re imagined as a political site. It is controlled by social, economic and political organizations which renders the body powerless. The individual body thus experiences a loss of power and autonomy, with social bodies appropriating all pervasive functions. In the case of Bangladesh it was the militia which was squarely held responsible for the perpetration of terror and gender violence by the International Crimes Tribunal, Bangladesh formed in 2009. Susan Brownmiller writes, "According to victims, Moslem Biharis who collaborated with the Pakistani Army-the hireling razakars-were the most enthusiastic rapists."³⁹

³⁸ Susan Brownmiller, *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape* (New York: Open Road Integrated Media, 2013), 67.

³⁹ Ibid., 67.

The problem of the body is thus connected to a larger political struggle and the operation and imbalance of power is inevitable in a modern bourgeois society as Foucault explains. The ‘nature’ of society is however drawn into question here as it is largely fractured by political unrest and fragmented by counteractive nationalist agendas.

Certainly the political climate of Bangladesh requires closer scrutiny if we are to understand the reorganization of power and the indefiniteness of the struggle. The creation of a nation state emerging out of the dominion of Pakistan on the principles of a developing cultural nationalism in the East, served to heighten the importance of the revolutionary movement and the State apparatus. According to Foucault, “In order to be able to fight a State which is more than just a government, the revolutionary movement must possess equivalent politico-military forces and hence must constitute itself as a party, organised internally in the same way as a State apparatus with the same mechanisms of hierarchies and organisation of powers. This consequence is heavy with significance”⁴⁰

The ‘body’ of the State thus also suffers a sense of mutilation in the imminent geo-political separation and is disabled by virtue of the armed conflict or revolution that must be necessarily undertaken for the formation of a new nation and an improved State apparatus. The scope of recovery rests with the reconstituted body of State power. However, as Foucault correctly suggests, the revolutionary government must necessarily adopt the same means for seizing control and must be fashioned on the same principles of autocratic bureaucracy which it has been struggling to react against. Bangladesh provides a fine illustration of Foucault’s theory in the subsequent military coups of 1975 which served to destabilize State power and reclaim the purpose of an ‘unfinished revolution’.

Throughout history, war has been gendered, and its implications and consequences for women and men differ in terms of the sex-based nature of the various injuries and deaths caused to the female and male bodies. The immediate aftermath and ultimate legacy of war also play out differently for the sexes. Women, regarded as carriers of culture whose bodies are symbols of the

⁴⁰ Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings*, ed. Colin Gordon, trans. Colin Gordon et al (New York: Pantheon Books), 59.

nation to be defended by men, are especially vulnerable in these conditions, where their identity is compromised.

Rape allows us to rethink the female body as ‘different’ from ‘normal’ and leads to the construction of the disabled or devalued body. This difference however is not so much grounded in physiology than a consideration of the body as culturally constructed. Despite Sheikh Mujibur Rahman’s December 22, 1971 proclamation declaring wartime rape victims as ‘birangonas’ (war heroines), a series of news reports, articles and letters to the editor concerning ‘war heroines’ and their rehabilitation published by ‘Dainik Bangla’ in January 1972, continued to refer to the women as ‘lanchhita’ or disgraced. In a four part series featured in ‘Dainik Bangla’, the headline of the third part referred to women as ‘biddhosto’ (ruined, destroyed, fallen to pieces) and ‘bibhranto’ (lost, misguided, bewildered).⁴¹

The reformulation of the body as ‘disabled’ or mutilated is perceived as anxiety-producing since it considerably shifts the subject’s own bodily image first and often engenders subversive assumptions of the ‘body’ in the mind of the object.

According to Foucault, human behaviour is codified and transcribed by the operations of power in society. It is used to categorize individuals either as ‘normal’ or ‘pathological’. It is ultimately the desire to be ‘normal’ which shapes individuals, their bodies and their minds. A ‘whole system of surveillance, hierarchies, inspections, bookkeeping and reports’ emerges in order to establish and sustain the disciplinary technology operated by the State.

Gender norms are likewise determined by the force of law and perpetuated through social practises which define the female body as sacred and virtuous in Eastern cultures. This association however positive may be regarded as a veiled attempt at maintaining status quo and preserving the patriarchal power balance. The idea of the ‘birangona’ trapped in her history and offering little scope for resistance carries along with it certain qualifiers and expectations. The woman is perceived as docile and powerless and hence drawn into a form of self surveillance. Although the female body became subject to the politics of glorification and social deification,

⁴¹ Anis Ahmed, *Bangladesh 1971: War Crimes, Genocide and Crimes against Humanity Operation Search Light: The Targets* (Kean University), www.kean.edu.

the image of the 'birangona' in media was that of a woman victimized and ruined, invisible and passive. Rescue and salvation was possible only through state programmes of social rehabilitation.

Foucault in his discourse on bio-power as operative in bourgeois societies refers to it as apparently benevolent but peculiarly invasive and effective form of social control. The manifestation of bio-power in its disciplinary capacity calls for a knowledge of the individual body by creating desires, attaching individuals to specific identities, and establishing norms against which individuals and their behaviours and bodies are judged and against which they police themselves. As a regulatory principle, bio-power is inscribed in policies and interventions governing the populace. The Foucauldian control of bodies for the interest of capitalism may be visible in the context of the 'birangona' in Bengali culture. The term 'birangona', served as a social title but the body was delineated from public discourse. The body came under the influence of an overarching state policy which demanded silence about the traumatic experience of rape and expected a degree of self monitoring or behavioural policing. In *Women, War and the Making of Bangladesh* (2011), Yasmin Saikia observes that in the case of Bangladesh, silence was a state policy-an instrument for the agency of the state and not the women.

Further, rehabilitation measures subjected the body's reproductive and productive functions to state regulations. The policies regarding abortion and adoption of war babies were largely based on the conveniences of the State and their social involvement was circumscribed by an elaborate network of vocational training designed by the government for the purpose of female empowerment. The discrepancy in the representation of the 'birangona' as a victim and heroine was made evident by the media which continued to critically focus on the disgrace and shame associated with the experience and the government's efforts at rehabilitation rather than reflecting upon the significance of the title. Foucault's notion of disciplinary and regulatory power finds a clear echo in the 'birangona' politics at play in Bangladesh. Social discourse combined with cultural and communal values forced women into roles of conformity through effective use of state control. Power was exercised by means of surveillance upon the individual actor through discipline rendering the body open to the influence of ideological state apparatuses.

In his analysis of bodies and power, Foucault outlines the relation of forms of punishment to particular, 'typical' societies, and therefore links them to different kinds of power relation. In

many ways, Foucault's work anticipates Agamben's assessment of sovereign power and biopolitics.

In *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, Giorgio Agamben states that death is not a biological moment but a political decision. He develops the concept of the *homo sacer*, the body excluded from the protections of the political community that may be killed with impunity, a modality of punishment seen by Agamben as originating in the Ancient Roman societies of exclusion. According to Agamben, the production of the bio-political body is the original activity of sovereign power because bio- power and sovereign power are intertwined in modern societies. Agamben rejects the idea of man being a free conscious political subject and claims that "In modern biopolitics, sovereign is he who decides on the value the non-value of life as such. Life – which, with the declaration of rights, had as such been invested with the principle of sovereignty – now itself becomes the place of a sovereign decision."⁴² Agamben argues that sovereign power determines the politics of death and living and the normal structuring of relations within society.

In the context of the 1971 genocide in Bangladesh, the foreign state (Pakistan) as a sovereign power was instrumental in exposing the body to death and marked a point at which the decision on life became a decision on death. Giorgio Agamben asserts that the sovereign is he who decides on the value or the non-value of life. Sovereign power is traditionally defined as the power to suspend the standard legal and political order. The brutal elimination of Bengali intellectuals, students, freedom fighters and political activists was a well defined operation for crushing resistance and systematically liquidating the scope of political discussion.

According to Anis Ahmed, at a meeting of the military top brass, Pakistani military leader and President, Yahya Khan (1969-1971) declared, "Kill three millions of them, the rest will eat of our hands."⁴³ The launch of Operation Searchlight on the eve of 25 March initiated one of the largest genocides in South East Asian history.

Recalling Foucault's analysis of the execution of Damians on the charge of regicide, one might observe that death in modern genocide societies is no less a public spectacle and becomes a

⁴² Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 118.

⁴³ Anis Ahmed, *Bangladesh 1971: War Crimes, Genocide and Crimes against Humanity Operation Search Light: The Targets* (Kean University) www.kean.edu.

matter of routine performance marked by a display of sovereign authority on individual bodies. Political life subsumes the private life of the individual and counteracts Foucault's claim that modern death is now the most secret and private aspect of existence. The body cannot escape the politics of sovereign control even in death since the choice of life or death does not rest with it.

The old power of death that symbolized sovereign power is once again reconstituted on the principle of the right to take life or let live in modern communities faced with the reality of genocide. The attack on the Bengali intelligentsia became a form of direct intervention on the part of the State seeking to curb alternate systems of knowledge from circulating in public. The attempt to centralize information and normalize knowledge might be interpreted as a means of exercising absolute power by the sovereign body. The explosion of disciplinary action and regulatory mechanisms was therefore operational both on individual bodies the State wished to discipline and on a population it wished to regularize. Death, power and knowledge simultaneously controlled the administration of bodies and calculated the management of life.

Agamben argues that there is something particular about the experience of death in modernity since it is often marked by a 'zone of indistinction' which arrives between life and death. Writing about the Holocaust and Jewish concentration camps, Agamben explains, "Whoever entered the camp moved in a zone of indistinction between outside and inside, exception and rule, licit and illicit, in which the very concepts of subjective right and judicial protection no longer made any sense."⁴⁴ Human life came to occupy an "uncertain and nameless terrain" governed by biological and political forces. Therefore, the Holocaust rendered death as visible and invisible, meaningful and meaningless, both horrific and banal. Benjamin Noys in his book, *The Culture of Death* contextualizes the Holocaust from this perspective. "After the Holocaust and during a century of genocides and mass exterminations, from Cambodia to Rwanda, it is difficult to claim that death is now 'invisible' or 'forbidden'. Instead our exposure to death takes on the form of being exposed to the possibility of death organized politically, through bureaucratic planning and governmental intervention".⁴⁵ The Bangladesh genocide much like the Holocaust which contextualized Agamben's critical reflections, led to the recognition of the fact that death can be 'unknown, unhonoured and unremarked'. The threat of mass extermination and the exposure to

⁴⁴ Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 140.

⁴⁵ Benjamin Noys, *The Culture of Death* (New York: Berg Press, 2005), 4-5.

death produce a sense of instability and emphasize the meaninglessness of existence. The time of death becomes indeterminable and the individual body moves away from a rational acceptance of death towards an irreversible ambiguity. Death can also be of the soul and not merely of the body. Hence during the Holocaust, people who survived mass extermination often committed suicide later, unable to continue living with the guilt of losing their family or the pervasive pain of remembering the crushing reality of the concentration camps. Lawrence L. Langer comments: “Just as we need to understand what a survivor of Bergen-Belsen meant when she wrote upon liberation, ‘We have not died, but we are dead,’ or what an Auschwitz companion...intended when she said after the war, I died in Auschwitz, but no one sees it,’ so we are obliged to interpret the idea that turns up so often in the testimony of returnees that for them, after the Holocaust, conventional chronology ceases to function”⁴⁶ Possibly this would be true of the birangonas.

The genocide in Bangladesh reflected the way in which modern power caused the body to shift into a ‘zone of indistinction’. Neither gender nor age was a factor deterring the perpetrators of war crimes. The massacre at Dhaka University at the launch of the Pakistani military operative on 25 March claimed nearly 200 lives. The correspondent from the British newspaper, ‘Daily Telegraph’, Simon Dring reported on March 30, “Two days later, bodies were still smouldering in burnt-out rooms, others were scattered outside, more floated in a nearby lake.”⁴⁷ The American Consul General in Dhaka, Archer Blood reported in a telegram sent to the U.S. State Department on March 31, 1971, “Six naked female bodies at Rokeya Hall, Dacca U. Feet tied together. Bits of rope hanging from ceiling fans. Apparently raped, shot and hung by their heels from fans.”⁴⁸ The savagery of death causes the realization that death is still a political decision. Blood further wrote, “A reign of terror began and thousands were slaughtered, innocent along with the allegedly guilty. And all in the name of preserving the unity of the country.”⁴⁹ According to Agamben, sovereign power takes on new masks in modern culture. The death of countless civilians during the genocide of 1971 emerged as a result of frantic and random state

⁴⁶ Lawrence L. Langer, *Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory* (London: Yale University Press, 1991), 140.

⁴⁷ Simon Dring, “Dacca, City of the Dead,” *Daily Telegraph*, March 30, 1971, www.genocidebangladesh.org.

⁴⁸ Gary J Bass, *The Blood Telegram: India's Secret War in East Pakistan* (New Delhi: Penguin Random House India, 2014), 72.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 69.

action, the “continuing orgy of violence”⁵⁰ seemingly perpetrated to protect sovereign authority. Scott Butcher, an American diplomat posted in Dhaka remembered, “I saw bodies rotting in the fields. I saw a decomposing body left in a main street, obviously left there as an example.”⁵¹ The ‘selective elimination’ of political opposition and the intelligentsia soon escalated to the conditions of genocide, until the sovereign power itself lost control of the action and began operating through scattered sectors of authority (the razakars and Al-Badrs), who created a new field of power over human life and brought a different dimension to violence and death in the war.

The bodies of the dead littered the streets of Dhaka as Scott Butcher recounts and many among them were women. The mass graves in Dhaka and Khulna bear testimony to the thousands who were killed in conflict, including women who were raped, mutilated and their bodies discarded. In 1999, the War Crimes Facts Finding Committee, Bangladesh noted that there were about 5000 mass graves across the country. Among the places in Dhaka, only a handful of them including the one in Rayer Bazar, Mirpur Intellectuals’ Graveyard, Jallad Khana, Jagannath Hall, and Rajarbagh Police Line have been protected as a historical site. Other recognized mass graves such as Shiyalbari, Government Bangla College in Mirpur, Harirampur and Muslimbazar at Mirpur, Government Physical Education College, Mohammadpur Thana Uttar Simanta and Adabar at Mohammadpur do not have any signs or monuments to mark them. A fish market has replaced Thataribazar killing field, while a road has been constructed through the killing field at Loharpul in Sutrapur.

Many birangonas were buried in these graves and it is important to discriminate between bodies that were decimated and bodies that were left behind or survived as ruins. Those who were dead were happily forgotten by the state, already overburdened with the problem of rescue and rehabilitation of those women who survived. Since the thesis will not have occasion to talk about the dead women, whose narratives can never be recovered, one must be attentive to the evidence of physical and symbolic brutality toward these bodies. The dead cannot be made ‘more’ dead and cannot be hurt, in most ordinary meanings of that term. But in death no less than

⁵⁰Gary J Bass, *The Blood Telegram: India’s Secret War in East Pakistan* (New Delhi: Penguin Random House India, 2014), 70.

⁵¹ Ibid., 54.

in life, there is a “doubleness” of the body: It is a physical thing—a structure of interconnected organs and a system of biochemical processes—but it, he or she, is also an embodied presence; it is both object and subject. The existence of the body as both a material thing and as the place of a life’s presence persists beyond death. The body even in death may have an affirmative function. The grieving family knows that the person or, perhaps, the echo of the person, is still there, at least as the focal point of mourning and reflection on the life that was. In some cases, these ‘bodies’ could never be traced and those who were never found were presumed ‘dead’ by their families. If, in opposition to this view, we were to adopt a more “hard-headed” view that the body is not the person and that, certainly, the body after death is nothing but so much body-stuff, we risk contorting and undermining the birangona’s private experience and her encounter with death.

(2.2) Memories of Rupture and Trauma: Theoretical approaches

Through a micro-historical analysis of the Partition of India and the 1971 Liberation War of Bangladesh it may be observed that dominant histories of state-centric conflicts are frequently stories recounted by the state and its elites. Civilians who experienced enemy aggression are blended into the background, thus becoming little more than a part of the traumatized landscape. In many cases, their narratives have been appropriated by the state, which in turn gains elements of legitimacy by telling these stories on behalf of the victims. By failing to document, analyze and address the experiences of those who suffered direct violence during these conflicts, the states involved have failed to resolve violence in their post conflict societies. Instead these states maintain an uneasy, volatile, ‘brittle peace’. However, this process is made far more problematic when memories of war are suppressed for the purposes of the state’s imagined purity. The pervasive veneration of the nation as female, especially as a mother, reinforces the idea of a natural delineation in terms of what is exclusively private, untainted by public spaces or ‘outsiders’. The politics of memory emerges through the systematic ways in which majority groups and nations construct and identify with particular narratives about historical periods or events.

According to Maurice Halbwachs, “Society from time to time obligates people not just to reproduce in thought previous events of their life, but also to touch them up, to shorten them or to complete them so that, however convinced we are that our memories are exact, we give them a prestige that reality did not possess.”⁵²

Memory is dependent on social structures and personal memory is often viewed through the lens of the collective. A critical re-examination of the official history necessitates an exploration of how the nationalist state and social agencies silence many of its citizens’ experiences of conflict (and those of non-citizens who live on borderlands) in order to produce a hegemonic narrative of war and nation building. At the height of a national movement that continues following the birth of the nation, these narratives are subsumed in a collective symbolic order through which we discern, interpret and remember past events. The creation of new myths, symbols and stories invariably leads to the destruction of smaller mnemonic communities which seek to preserve their ways of thinking and experiencing. The moral authority of dominant memorials or narratives overrides micro-narratives that may offer alternative or contradictory views.

Bengali writers recounting the events of the Liberation War of Bangladesh such as Muntassir Mamun’s *Chuknagarey Gonohotya* (2008) have attempted to highlight some of these exclusions and silences. Such publications have been crucial in unearthing evidence and providing testimonies of war crimes committed during 1971 but the intensely nationalistic tone of many of these narratives have contributed to an extreme polarization: between larger cultural communities and the marginalized sections of women, children and the aged within a specific socio-cultural environment.

Bangladeshi writer, Hasan Azizul Haque notes that although on both sides of the border, men had to forfeit their lives and property, forcibly leave their country as refugees and beggars,

⁵² Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, ed. Lewis A. Coser (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 51.

Bengali literature, “chose not to serve its obligation to portray the magnitude of pain and loss of the Bengali society.”⁵³

Though it is difficult to explain the general frame of silence in terms of a self conscious choice, Bengali authors have often tended to deal more with the ideology and politics of the Partition and Liberation of Bangladesh rather than the trauma and terror. The emotional journeys and practical hardships recollected by Bengali authors stand in sharp contrast to the brutality of communal violence which appears with such striking details in the works of Saadat Hasan Manto and Bhisham Sahani.

In contrast, women’s histories attempted to rescue women from the immense condescension of history to establish them as active participants of their lives, rather than the passive subjects of historical forces. The multiple discourses surrounding women’s wartime lives as contained in memoirs, autobiographies and diaries were used retrospectively by women seeking to construct a ‘usable past’ for themselves. As Charlotte Bunch seeks to explain, “There is no private domain of a person’s life that is not political and there is no political issue that is not ultimately personal. The old barriers have fallen.”⁵⁴ The ‘social’ is constituted through interactions and communications with the private. Penny Summerfield in “Reconstructing Women’s Wartime Lives” argues that the relationship between cultural or social constructions and individual consciousness can be uncovered through careful and sensitive readings of women’s oral histories.

To quote an excerpt from an interview between Prof. Yasmin Saikia and a prominent Bangladeshi freedom fighter and political activist, “This talk of women and rape is okay to an extent. But the kind of work that should be written about the war is the glorious victory of Bangladeshis against Pakistanis. Rape happens in war. But it is not something to tell the future generation.”⁵⁵ There is certainly a need to explore the politics of exclusion and to understand how these micro-histories can possibly fit into the grand design but before embarking on a close

⁵³ Hasan Azizul Haque, *Kathasahityer Kathakata* (Dhaka: Jatiyo Shahitya Prakashani, 1981), 16.

⁵⁴ Charlotte Bunch, *Building Feminist Theory, Essays from Quest a Feminist Quarterly* (New York: Longman, 1981), 34.

⁵⁵ Yasmin Saikia, *Women, War, and the Making of Bangladesh: Remembering 1971* (London: Duke University Press, 2011), 79.

reading of the narratives and testimonies of women during the Liberation War of 1971, it is important to outline the theoretical approaches which will guide the rest of the research.

(2.3) Between Memory and History: Linking experience, testimony and history

It is fundamental to critically reflect on how it is that an event is remembered, told and interpreted, and how this interpretive framework denounces or avoids the experience of rape. Pierre Nora's essay, "Between Memory and History", reflects on the sites of memory which are recalled in connection to the real memory of the event. The memoirs written during the war serve as material sites of memory recalling that which has been lost or denied due to socio-political circumstances. These memories of war and rape thus become a narrative political construct against the erasure of the victims' experience. It often functions as a tool which gives meaning to survival. More importantly, they invest the time and space of violence with meaning and unite the memory of trauma with the actual location.

By linking memory, testimony and history, these memoirs explore the experience that is historicized and allows us to interpret experience from different and challenging modalities. Joan W. Scott in her essay, 'The Evidence of Experience', states that,

"Experience, in this approach, not the origin of our explanation, but that which we want to explain. This kind of approach does not undercut politics by denying the existence of subjects; it instead interrogates the processes of their creation, and in so doing...opens new ways for thinking about change."⁵⁶

Experience serves as a means of self expression, which in no way qualifies as authoritative evidence but leads to the production of new knowledge. The writing of experiences of rape and trauma can be a call to defy the foundational histories which essentialize explanations and repeated classifications. The experience of war crime or rape which is foregrounded in these

⁵⁶ Joan W. Scott, "The Evidence of Experience," *Critical Enquiry* 17, no. 4 (Summer 1991): 64, pages.ankbild.ac.at/.../Joan%20Scott%20Evidence.

memoirs attempts to see beyond the physical act to the political and psychological mechanism that shape the survivors or victims of such a crime. Referring to the authority of experience, Joan W. Scott identifies history as a foundationalist discourse.

Its primary premises, categories and presumptions are unquestioned and unquestionable. Experience has been reintroduced as a foundation for historical writing in the wake of the critique of empiricism, which does not entirely rest on the analysis of facts and reality, but seeks to find varied connotations of a specific historical event.

Scott's reference to Raymond Williams, serves to exemplify the evolution of experience in historical writing. Experience, as a particular kind of consciousness, came to be recognized in the twentieth century as a form of active awareness, including feelings as well as thought. Williams in his book, *'Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society'*, identifies experience "not only as truth, but the most authentic kind of truth."⁵⁷ The notions of subjective testimony are, according to Williams, immediate, true and authentic, reflecting the individual's ability to react to external influences- such as social conditions, institutions and forms of belief. The debate over the nature of experience as internal or external, subjective or objective is immaterial as Williams finds the prior existence of the individual subject to be of critical importance. Experience as an internal faculty constitutes the subject's being or consciousness, and as an external influence it indicates the material on which consciousness acts.

Scott also refers to E. P Thompson in order to illuminate the psychological dimension of experience. Experience, frames a 'social being', according to Thompson, through a continuous engagement with the lived realities of social life such as family and religion. "People do not only experience their own experience as ideas, within thought and its procedures, they also experience their own experience as feeling."⁵⁸

Thompson explains that feeling is culturally inscribed within familial norms, kinship obligations and religious beliefs. This is how individual memory escapes the structural grip of a larger social consciousness. The memoirs, written by women during the Bangladesh War recount experiences

⁵⁷ Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 128.

⁵⁸ E. P. Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1978), 170.

which are produced through objective circumstances and created as a consequence of compelling social-historical arrangements and politics. Their experiences and memories shift focus from structure to agency by insisting on the subjectively felt nature of experience. Since their statements or actions are not authorized or legitimized by anyone else, they are invested with a sense of autonomy and objectivity which is a prerequisite for framing any kind of historiography.

Feminist scholars such as Judith Newton have reflected upon the issue of objectivity and experience in women's writing and found the relationship between thought and experience to be transparent. According to Scott, "Part of the project of some feminist history has been to unmask all claims of objectivity as an ideological cover for masculine bias by pointing out the shortcomings, incompleteness, and exclusiveness of mainstream history."⁵⁹

Scott mentions that "social practises" in all their "immediacy and entirety" become the material for "sensuous experiences". Women occupy a unique subject position in the context of the 1971 Bangladesh War and the memoirs written by them effectively dismantle the hegemonic processes of subject construction and the dominant discourses of narration through a historical retelling of individual experiences. In this manner, women have also sought to resist the structural determination of identity and function directed towards them by state and society. These memoirs constitute a discursive production of knowledge of the self and interpret personal experience by refiguring the categories of historical analysis.

In the aftermath of the 1971 Bangladesh War, literature as memory plays a crucial role in the search of justice or self vindication. The literary reconstruction of past events causes a piecing together of fragments of memory with the hope of understanding the violence, remembering it, reporting it, in order to move on. Elizabeth Jelin in her book, *State Repression and the Labors of Memory*, suggests that memory is an important factor in the recovery of personal dignity and justice. She proposes that, "There are...active and ongoing political struggles about meaning-about the meaning of what went on in the past and also about the meaning of memory itself."⁶⁰

⁵⁹ Joan W. Scott, "The Evidence of Experience," *Critical Enquiry* 17, no. 4 (Summer 1991): 64, pages.akbild.ac.at/.../Joan%20Scott%20Evidence.

⁶⁰ Elizabeth Jelin, *State Repression and the Labors of Memory*, trans. Judy Rein and Marcial Godoy-Anativia (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 24.

But the question of justice becomes, in post war Bangladesh, a factual impossibility of bringing to trial all those responsible for violations and providing compensation for all victims. This situation is further problematized by the absence of the governmental agents and accomplices who were responsible for the crimes and abuses committed. The recent political turn which has shed light on the legacies of atrocity by establishing international war tribunals in Bangladesh during the 1980's and 1990's have sought to reconcile victims and abusers rather than redress the crimes that have been suffered by civilians.

A model for reconciliation through a series of carefully designed public commissions was constructed as substitute for a rigorous criminal legal system. The sub national conflicts between regions, ethnicities, and ideological affiliations have almost entirely been forgotten due to the focus on Pakistan's efforts to invade or thwart a neighbour. Histories written within the frame of transitional justice did not tend to make any clean breaks with the past- although they were primarily aimed at placing the newly formed Awami League government on higher moral grounds than their predecessors. The consolidators of a new democratic system hardly needed to justify their own truth claims by referring to old enmities.

In this respect, memory serves as a means of seeking or gaining justice by constantly negotiating with the experiences of collective and individual trauma, which can never be entirely articulated or resolved. In the memoirs written by women during this period, collective conflict and collective memory have become coincident, rather than sequential; the lives and afterlives of atrocities cross paths. Elizabeth Jelin observes that there is considerable critical debate about the degree to which past recollections are individually produced or situated in a field of social relations. She proposes that the past acquires meaning in intersection with the present.

This process of meaning formation allows the individual to reconcile with the trauma of past events and frame a self identity in the living 'now' as opposed to the judicial proceedings and monumental documentary efforts by the state.

A new historiography emerges through these memoirs, which explores the question of what state violence implies for women, who are faced with violation and abuse by virtue of their gender and position. Elizabeth Jelin reflects on how gender figures into the way past events are

remembered. Rather than marshalling history to an ethical cause, the memoirs adopt a retrospective approach which frames individual memory for the purpose of preserving the time and space of struggle. Memory through literature concedes a space for justice by creating intimate spaces for the disclosure of violence. This disclosure can be interpreted as a memory that seeks justice and a memorial that does not allow the subject to be forgotten. These testimonies, primarily, do not seek to expose the past, as much as trace how these accounts have been converted into public memory.

Remembering one's private and political history is inextricably linked to issues of self identity, kinship ties and dignity. Judith Herman in *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence- From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*, suggests that "after every atrocity one can expect to hear the same predictable apologies: it never happened; the victim lies; the victim exaggerates; the victim brought it upon herself; and in any case it is time to forget the past and move on."⁶¹ Learning to remember clearly involves a basic debate about what is worth remembering and an acknowledgment of negative experiences which could potentially lead the history of societies, attempting to recuperate from violence, into a problematic discourse.

(2.4) The 'Unspeakable': Silence and amnesia in narratives of trauma

Although this thesis will primarily discuss the memoirs and testimonies of women survivors and reflect on non-fictional accounts, this section begins with a mention of Shaheen Akhtar's novel, *Talaash* (2005), where the 'unspeakability' of sexual violation and vulnerabilities experienced by the body is rendered through fiction. The novel is ostensibly told by Mukti, who is a researcher born on 26 March 1971—the night of independence. Like Rushdie's children, Mukti is a midnight's child, and her name—freedom—is emblematic of the nation. She is part of a research team which is tracing the lives of birangonas, 28 years after independence. However,

⁶¹ Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence- From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (New York: Basic Books, 1992), unityandstruggle.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Herman_Trauma-and-Recovery.pdf.

the narrative voice fluctuates, and Mukti falters in her attempt to translate the experiences of women who were continually raped or put at the sexual service of the enemy. Mukti tries to frame a definite history of women in war, but when it comes to the birangonas, this trailing is impossible, and she finds herself unable to speak.

The central plot of the novel is associated with the protagonist, Mariam or Mary's experience in the Pakistani camp. Juxtaposed with Mukti's knowledge of what happened in those camps is the uncertainty of Mary's recollection. "Did you have a dupatta; or were you wearing a sari? Was there a fan in the room?"⁶² Mukti asks. Mary is not sure of anything, but thinks that she did have a dupatta, and yes, there was a fan, as they were in a schoolroom. "Then why did she not hang herself?"⁶³ Mukti wonders. The uncertainty of the answers hints at the unspeakability of the violations performed, as Mary throws questions back at Mukti. "Can one explain all this? Is there a language to describe this experience? What language shall I use?"⁶⁴ Mary's inability to give definite responses to the questions posed to her is part of the limits of representability, both artistic as well as of historical recounting. Despite this, it is not as if the women themselves were unaware that they would be asked to bear testimony, and even as prisoners in the camp had hoped that strands of hair or pieces of cloth would bear witness to their situation in the future. This inability to express is accompanied by an inability to comprehend. The researchers and social workers, both immediately after the war and 28 years later when Mukti's research project begins, are themselves shocked and rendered speechless.

The incomprehensibility that is part of this story of violation, violence and torture is enhanced when it is interspersed with a scene of desire. Mary imagines Major Ishtiaque proffering her sympathy and understanding and possibly being in love with her. This scene is incongruous as Major Ishtiaque was one of the Pakistani soldiers who had raped her at the camp. This moment of fantasy—of a moment when the mind transgresses the bodily limitations to find a realm of plenitude and desire—is surprisingly marked by a scene of complete recognition. While Mary is beguiled, or beguiles herself, into thinking of this man as her lover, someone who will take her to the Shalimar gardens where she will find her place among the women in Lahore, where the act of rape will be replaced by one of love and fulfilment, a sudden glance at a photograph draws her

⁶² Shaheen Akhtar, *Talaash* trans. Ella Dutta, (New Delhi: Zubaan, 2011), 88.

⁶³ Ibid., 89.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 89.

back to reality. A photograph of a woman slips out. She is apparently the major's wife, and lines of a letter hoping that he will be faithful to her and requesting him not to fall into the snares of long-tressed Bengali women also become visible to the deluded Mary. Staring at this photograph, Mary seems to merge into that other woman in the georgette dupatta. The two women function as mirror images, as Mary is jolted back to the realisation that Major Ishtiaque can never love her, that he is her enemy, and all the ghazals and the roses bear no significance for her. The binaries—Pakistani/Bengali, friend/enemy, lover/rapist—establish themselves in a moment of recognition, as the woman in the photograph and Mary blend into each other, even while they are completely separated into irreconcilable position. Firdous Azim remarks that “this ambiguity of position becomes even more telling after independence, as Mary slips and slides between conflicting roles—wife or prostitute—when every sexual act feels like rape, and husband/ rapist and sexual customer blur into each other.”⁶⁵

Paul Ricoeur in his book, *Memory, History, Forgetting* (2006), addresses the mechanism of forgetting which paralyzes the possibility of accurately remembering certain events of the past. The memoirs, written by women during the Bangladesh War, recount their memories as causes and effects, which become conflated with struggles and oppositions. By connecting common and shared memories, these memoirs seek to fill up the time that has separated trauma from public memory. However, the recollection of traumatic events in the course of the production of a narrative leads to a condition where the subject overly remembers some events at the expense of others. Repression, dissociation and denial, are thus, not simply dictated by social constructs but regulated by the individual consciousness. According to Judith Herman, “The dialectic of trauma gives rise to complicated, sometimes uncanny alterations of consciousness.”⁶⁶ The revisiting of the past is essential to understand the present, however, the perplexities arising on both sides of the exchange, invite us to consider the gaps in experience, which may be consciously or unconsciously established by the subject. Exploring how personal traumas evolve into public

⁶⁵ Firdous Azim, “Speaking the Unspeakable or the Limits of Representability,” *India International Centre Quarterly* 41, no. 3 (2014): 249-257, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24390793>.

⁶⁶ Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence- From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (New York: Basic Books, 1992), unityandstruggle.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Herman_Trauma-and-Recovery.pdf.

memories requires a level of psychological insight, which might reveal the delicate, contingent sequence between what is ‘known’ and that which is ‘shared’.

The subject is often divided between the call to remember (and pursue justice) or to forget (and reconcile). The sources of these memories may serve as causal factors behind the tendency to forget certain logical details pertaining to the traumatic event. These memories are frequently derived from traumas of losing family members, or friends, which invest the source of these memories with affective significance. In a sense, these memoirs recast memories as dependent variables contoured by personal experience that are collated into something collective and thus ‘public’.

The episodic amnesia, visible in terms of the trajectory sequenced by the victim, is rooted in the intimate experience of personal trauma or pain. According to Judith Herman, “When the victim is devalued (a woman, a child), she may find that the most traumatic events of her life take place outside the realm of socially validated reality. Her experience becomes unspeakable.”⁶⁷ At times, the victim does not tell the story, but re-enacts it in memory. The brief, abrupt statements, with connectives often omitted, the narrative contradictions and dissociations reveal that the subject is neither trying to search for the historicity of the experience nor is she seeking to recapture the dynamic flow of events. The witness in the testimony is concerned less with the past than with regaining a sense of the past in the present.

Referring to the mass genocide of Jews in the Second World War, post-Holocaust critic, George Steiner had commented that the world of Auschwitz lies outside speech as it lies without reason. Sorrow, numbness, shame or guilt often functions to distance the subject from the pain of events, offering a form of safety in unspoken utterance. Sri Lankan anthropologist, E. Valentine Daniel in his book, *Charred Lullabies*, explains that, “Beauty finds language wanting because of beauty’s profound inexhaustibility; pain finds language wanting in pain’s excruciating particularity.”⁶⁸ The victim suffers from an inability to assimilate or fully experience the trauma

⁶⁷Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence- From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (New York: Basic Books, 1992), unityandstruggle.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Herman_Trauma-and-Recovery.pdf.

⁶⁸ E. Valentine Daniel, *Charred Lullabies: Chapters in an Anthropology of Violence* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 56.

at the time of its occurrence, the pain associated with the past experience is felt in the present when the victim precisely relives the memory through a narration of the traumatic episode. The memoirs, written by women during the Bangladesh War, substantively bring the pain into view without blunting its terrors and idealizing the recuperative properties of a cathartic expression.

They facilitate a process wherein the subject is covertly returned to a world of the creative imagination and the individual's discursive intentions reassuringly override the physical trauma to express the lived experience in all its vividness. The real nature of the past event, which is recollected by the victim, is often complicated by the question of authenticity. Sigmund Freud suggests that the present often invents the past traumatic event through a process of psychological fixation which takes root in the mind of the victim. He pointed out an important fact about the nature of trauma: the compulsion of the human mind to repeat traumatic events over and over again. He termed this the 'repetition compulsion'.

In his essay, "Beyond the Pleasure Principle" (1920), Freud identifies two major instinctual drives which governs the human mind, 'Eros' (sexual instincts) and 'Thanatos' (the death drive). The compulsion to relive traumatic events operates in the human psyche as a result of the 'death drive' which causes the victim to grapple with the fact of death. The individual attempts to come to terms with the inevitability of death although it provides no possibility of pleasure. Freud interprets this compulsion to repeat as "more primitive, more elementary, more instinctual than the pleasure principle which it overrides."⁶⁹

The repetition of the 'death drive' causes the victim to relocate traumatic events of the past in the present, despite the unpleasurable nature of the experience. Freud argues that the recovered memory leads the individual to experience disabling fears, anxiety and disturbing thoughts, which distort the real nature of the traumatic event, often resulting in the creation of a false memory. The memoirs of women written during the 1971 Bangladesh War are characterized by a refusal to unduly idealize the experience of trauma and, therefore, stand in sharp contention to Freud's theory. There are no traces of artfulness or desirability in the representation of the traumatized. The reality of the socio-historical context and the principal cause of trauma are not

⁶⁹ Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1953), 74.

met with any strenuous resistance in the process of remembering. The subject is rarely imprisoned in the material effects of the catastrophe since the narrative moves beyond the immediacy of the event towards an understanding of corporeality, identity and discursive power in the field of pain, struggle, death and healing.

Cathy Caruth in her book, *Unclaimed Experiences: Trauma, Narrative and History*, writes, “For history to be a history of trauma means that it is referential precisely to the extent that it is not fully perceived as it occurs; or to put it somewhat differently, that a history can be grasped only in the very inaccessibility of its occurrence.”⁷⁰ In this respect it may be observed that the trauma assumes a narrative beginning in the past, needing a successful integration into the present, rather than being activated by the present. In her analysis of Freud’s history of the Jews (*Moses and Monotheism*), Cathy Caruth refers to the period of ‘latency’ or the time that elapses between the actual event and the effects of the experience. According to Caruth, it is during this period that the victim undergoes a process of repeated forgetting to cope with the trauma. But the historical power of the trauma lies in its inherent forgetting, through which the experience reemerges at the surface of consciousness, and it is first experienced at all. The historicity of the event can be fully evident only in connection with another place, and in another time. But the return of the forgotten experience, as it leaves the space of unconsciousness to appear in the conscious present, is paradoxically, what preserves the event in its literality.

The historical fixity of the memoirs written during the 1971 Bangladesh war is often made more complex by the continuous fluidity of narration, which unhinges the stream of time. Establishing the ‘reality’ of things and events by fixing their origin, no doubt, validates its historicity but the act of remembering the forgotten experience is not simply a means of preserving the literal value of the experience. The memoirs measure a passage of time and glide over the evolution of experience as it occurs in the mind of the subject. The form of the memoir or personal diary may or may not follow a strict chronology in the retelling of certain critical events that shape the author’s experience. However, despite the distortion of a specific time sequence, the author establishes a symbolic relationship between historical time and experience.

⁷⁰ Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1996), 18.

The subject becomes an observer, who can scan from a fixed position in the present, the symbolic significance of past events.

Within the structure of the memoir, events may exist as raw perceptual moments, but the individual creative potential which shapes the spatio-temporal field associates the past and present through a series of symbolic images and interpretive patterns. There is a perpetual mediation not only between the past and present but also between the horizon of forgotten experience and its existing symbolic potentiality. The emergence of the forgotten experience from the realm of unconsciousness may thus fix the moment, storing it within its physical confines, but the subject over a period of time creates a thread of symbolic references which facilitates a relative understanding of the experience.

The issue of self understanding and its limits calls for a more reflective mode of narration, one that is usually accessible only through interviews or diaries. The possibility of understanding or processing traumatic past experiences lies in the individual's ability to develop mental mechanisms, which dissociate the emotional from the material. Emotional interferences dramatically reduce recall, although emotional responses primarily serve as triggers or cues for the complete recovery of the forgotten experience. The violence of traumatic events and the explicit content of memory may inhibit the process of retrieval as they reassert the psychological pain or injury. The dispute is about what these events signify and what should be made out of them. The subject therefore tends to consciously limit or regulate the emotional and vulnerable aspects of memory by simply narrating the chain of causal factors which culminate in the occurrence of the event.

Paul Ricoeur in *Memory, History, Forgetting*, claims that the function of memory is to remember, not forget. Forgetting is relegated to the 'reverse side of memory' according to Ricoeur. However, he finds a positive meaning in the act of forgetting and considers it necessary because it entails a 'spirit of forgiveness'.

The duty to remember is a duty to teach, whereas the duty to forget is a duty to go beyond anger and hatred." The 'duty to forget' must not command past events into oblivion and deem them reconciled as a part of the process of social recovery or therapy. Instead, the individual must exercise the 'right of forgetting' as a means of creating a space for

reconciliation. It entails not the individual's obligation to forget the injury but a "wish in the optative mood...to state (evil) in a pacified mode, without anger."⁷¹

The memoirs chronicling the experiences of women during the 1971 Bangladesh War react against forced forms of forgetting such as political trials, amnesty and overt acts of state memorialization by preserving the traces of scars caused by the war. However, they also attempt to seek a form of self reconciliation or 'forgiveness' which allows the narratives to achieve a wholeness or coherence of meaning in the midst of the chaos that ensues as a result of the war.

In one of the accounts recorded by the Ain o Shalish Kendra in, *Rising from the Ashes*, Elijan recalls her experience of the war:

The soldiers did the same thing to other women in our village that day. Masuda Khatun had just had a baby; her insides were still sore from her pregnancy. How they assaulted her! And I was just a child. The way they assaulted me, can that be forgiven? It would have been better if they had killed me. Then I would not have this pain inside me...and I would not have been shamed in the eyes of the people of my country. I cannot forgive the men who defiled me but I have forgiven myself for what happened to me. I would not have survived without it.⁷²

The question of 'forgiveness' gathers greater complexity when the analysis shifts to concerns lying beyond the realm of the moral, ethical or philosophical culture. In an interview between Paul Ricoeur and Sorin Antohi which took place in Budapest on March,10, 2003, Ricoeur addressed the question of 'who' should seek forgiveness and 'why'.

According to Ricoeur, "The problem of forgiveness concerns a request addressed to others...Forgiveness is a personal act, an act from person to person that does not concern juridical institutions."⁷³ The logic of excess which governs forgiveness and the logic of equivalence which

⁷¹ Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 495.

⁷² *Rising from the Ashes*, ed. Shaheen Akhtar, Suraiya Begum et al, trans. Niaz Zaman (Dhaka: The University Press Limited, 2019), 173.

⁷³ Paul Ricoeur, "Memory, History, Forgiveness: A dialogue between Paul Ricoeur and Sorin Antohi," *Janus Head* 8, no. 1 (2005): 34, www.janushead.org/8-1/ricoeur.pdf.

dictates justice may be balanced through a symbolic interchange that the subject achieves through the act of compassion. Ricoeur's critique of the public institutions of justice embodies his doubts regarding their efficacy to deliver judgement about the evil done and suffered. He states, "There is the idea of justice left to its own device something that is vindictive, something that is very hard to distinguish from vengeance."⁷⁴ Amnesty does not secure justice nor does it facilitate forgiveness.

Even in the absence of judicial redressal, forgiveness may be achieved. Those guilty of war crimes during the Bangladesh War have often gone unrecognized or escaped punishment due to the long passage of time between 1971 and 2009 when the International Crimes Tribunal was set up to investigate and prosecute suspects for the genocide committed by the Pakistani army and their local collaborators. But following Ricoeur's analysis of fault and forgiveness, one might conclude that the memoirs written by women recounting the trauma of genocide, have successfully merged the gap between the private world of forgiveness and the public world of justice. The memoirs reveal what Ricoeur calls 'an appeased memory'. "The appeased memory does not seek to forget the evil suffered or committed. It seeks rather to speak of it without anger".⁷⁵

The horrors of genocide and the crimes committed against women during the Bangladesh War are unforgivable in terms of the magnitude of suffering and its long lasting effects. However, through the personal narratives and testimonies memory acts as a levelling agent bringing fault and forgiveness into close proximity. Ricoeur imagines forgiveness as a face-to-face encounter which closes the distance between the 'depth of fault' and the 'height of forgiveness'. There is a willingness to forgive which operates within the subject and it works as an impulse towards the resolution of psychological conflict and pain. Forgiveness attributes a sense of power to the agency or victim although she stands to gain no substantial reward through it. According to Ricoeur, it is the individual's original predisposition to good which leads them to offer forgiveness even in the absence of repentance.

⁷⁴Paul Ricoeur, "Memory, History, Forgiveness: A dialogue between Paul Ricoeur and Sorin Antohi," *Janus Head* 8, no. 1 (2005): 34, www.janushead.org/8-1/ricoeur.pdf.

⁷⁵Ibid., 34.

One of the women, who spoke to Nilima Ibrahim after the war, said to her, “I have forgiven them for what they did to me. It took me many years but I know that Allah will be their judge. I am at peace with myself now”⁷⁶

The subject does not forgive knowing or expecting that the other will repent. Forgiveness springs from goodness or faith in a higher power to dispense justice. This allows the subject to move towards a restoration of the self as it pre-existed before the occurrence of the trauma. By alleviating the guilt of victimhood and letting go the angst associated with the crime, forgiveness causes the individual to regain the original state of innocence before the fall.

However, victims of rape often viewed themselves as possessors of a ledger of actions for which they remained responsible across time and changes and so capable of guilt, promise-making, shame and pride. They often shared a moral accountability for the crime. James Booth regards this as “mineness of actions, a property that lies at the heart of the person as a potential subject of moral imputation.”⁷⁷ The tendency of the victim to regard herself as the culprit is ambiguously tied to the issue of agency and the reciprocal exchange of repentance and forgiveness through the act of giving and receiving. Nonetheless, through Ricoeur’s argument that forgiveness draws the victim and the perpetrator to a horizontal plane, it may be assumed that the possibility of foregoing guilt exists seminally within forgiveness itself.

Forgiveness, despite the absence of the perpetrator and his repentance, may serve the purpose of arresting the relentless reworking of the past replete with memories of violence, atrocities and suffering. The spectral horrors of genocide can never be contained within a specific temporality. It seeps into the present and future through a process of cyclic repetition. In this respect, forgiveness serves as a means of exercising self will and reclaiming agency by breaking down moral underpinnings of guilt and notions of victimhood as a condition devoid of hope or the desire of continuity.

The memoirs written by women recounting the horrors of genocide, do not preach the doctrine of forgiveness as an overtly moral or theological principle. Memory becomes a matter of

⁷⁶ Nilima Ibrahim, *Ami Birangona Bolchi* (Dhaka: Jagriti Prokashoni, 2010), 51.

⁷⁷ James W. Booth, *Communities of Memory: On Witness, Identity and Justice* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006), 9.

testimony which remains faithful to the convictions of the past. Ricoeur's account of Christian forgiveness does not fully apply in this context either. The memoirs discuss the materiality of events and the repercussions it produced in personal lives. However, there is certainly an impulse towards recovery through the unbinding from guilt that comes from forgiveness. In his book, *The End of Memory: Remembering Rightly in a Violent World*, Miroslav Volf advocates the ways in which one can 'remember rightly', so that memory having impelled forgiveness and reconciliation might go beyond itself and the memories of wrong suffered might be released. These memories, according to Volf cannot or should not be redeemed and therefore must be forgotten.

He explains, "We will not 'forget' so as to be able to rejoice: we will rejoice and therefore let those memories slip out of our minds."⁷⁸ The erasure of memory is necessary as it creates space for justice. As Nietzsche observes in 'On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life', forgetting is essential to human action, just as not only light but darkness too is essential for human life. If forgetting marks the limits of redemption, then Nietzsche is perhaps correct in his analysis that, "He who cannot sink down on the threshold of the moment and forget all the past...will never know what happiness is -worse, he will never do anything to make others happy."⁷⁹

Forgiveness however does not arise logically in the context of the trauma and violence suffered during genocide. It is uncertain whether true forgiveness at all exists. Following the Hegelian distinction between ethics and morality, the possibility of forgiveness may be more clearly understood.

Avishai Margalit, in *The Ethics of Memory*, discusses the subject's obligation to forgive and forget. Morality is universal and non preferential, it is required of all individuals. Ethics on the contrary is personal and involves preferentiality. According to Margalit, the individual is under no obligation to form ethical relations with the perpetrators of crime or violence. The victim may

⁷⁸ Miroslav Volf, *The End of Memory: Remembering Rightly in a Violent World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 2006), 214.

⁷⁹ Friedrich Nietzsche, "On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life," in *Theories of Memory: A Reader 2007*, ed. Michael Rossington and Anne Whitehead (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2007), 105.

choose to lead a life divorced from the desire to forgive the wrong that has been committed. However, what binds relations between strangers and with humanity in general is our ability to form ties of morality. In the face of trauma or victimhood, morality falls short in its attempt to produce forgiveness. Margalit asserts that forgiveness is not the blotting out of memory rather it stems from personal intentions and leads the individual to master the feelings of resentment that occur as a response to the incident.

The choice of forgiveness is thus based on the principle of ethics which is preferential and does not work under any form of obligation. Forgiveness allows the individual to re-establish their relation to one self. It enables the subject to arrest the tide of vengefulness or resentment which might potentially counter the impulse to achieve psychological harmony. Forgiveness, when viewed in accordance with ethical considerations thus calls for forgiving the perpetrator while not forgetting the injury or harm done.

The complex issue of morality then unfolds in relation to the demand for forgiveness. Margalit suggests that it is our moral duty to remember crimes against humanity since it reminds us of the need to prevent such evil from occurring in the future. The moral obligation that rests with the remembrance of violence and genocide ensures that such injustice is not repeated by future generations. Margalit essentializes the act of bearing moral witness as fundamental to preserving the history of violence and suffering. The testimonies thus framed must be authenticated by subjects who have been eyewitnesses to the crime and the suffering it caused. In addition, Margalit argues, they must also serve the role of witness as actual sufferers or observers, who can tell their story without the need of any mediation. Moreover, the witness must also be motivated by a hope “that in another place or another time there exists, or will exist, a moral community that will listen to their testimony.”⁸⁰

Margalit’s distinction between morality and ethics is thus based on the belief that the act of moral witnessing will be made more effective when the testimony bears ethical relations to the crime or the criminal. The memoirs written by women during the 1971 Bangladesh War may be read as products of such a moral witnessing as they are drawn on the line between ethical and

⁸⁰ Avishai Margalit, *The Ethics of Memory* (Cambridge: University of Harvard Press, 2002), 155.

moral relations. Forgiveness, if any, is reached through the vital process of serving an ethical obligation to the nation, community and self. It is centred on the individual's need to forego feelings of distress, trauma or guilt and continue with the process of living.

On grounds of moral duty, the memoirs perpetuate narratives of suffering and pain as a decisive attempt to bear testimony to crimes that seek to undermine the very foundation of morality itself and also to rewrite the past by controlling collective memory. In the background of a traditionalist society such as that in Bangladesh, the memoirs flout the foundational principles of collective witnessing by defining the specificity of women's experiences. They hold a faithful orientation to the past and against every expectation make a vision of the future possible by tacitly anticipating forgiveness.

In analyzing the idea of moral agency and its conditions, there is a practical necessity of recognizing the implications it has on personal identity. Memory is central to the formation of identity. However, since hegemonic collective memory operates invisibly and involuntarily, the testimonies of marginalized social groups such as that of women may be seen as an act of political subversion through the deconstruction of the semiotic power web. It is thus important to decipher the moral, social and cultural mechanisms through which women's identity is constructed in these testimonies rather than attacking their absence in official state narratives. The identity of the 'raped' woman is precariously placed in history and often obliterated entirely by forming collectives through which they may seek group identification. It is debatable whether individual identities can at all be retrieved from the legacy of institutional and popular practices which has subsumed them within the collective social order of 'birangonas'. In this context, the testimonies of women written during the 1971 Bangladesh War serve the purpose of preserving the memory-identity of those, otherwise lost to an audience too eager to frame larger public and political discourses.

Despite the fracture caused by the violence and suffering of the event, self identity is framed by a spatio-temporal continuity. Individual memories stem from the consciousness of a single person, remembrances that she can claim as a private possession. The memories of a single person cannot be transferred unto another despite the similarity of circumstances or conditions. W. James Booth in his book, *Communities of Memory: On Witness, Identity and Justice* (2006) argues in favour of the exclusivity of personal identity in the face of its shared stigmatized status.

The idea of moral agency is linked to the notion of identity-across-time according to Booth. Individual memory binds the past to the present and contains within itself a moral commitment to plot the future. The individual's obligation to remember may be set as a condition for carrying out other duties, such as acts of reparation or a recovery of the self. In the absence of individual memory, the creation of practical identities would remain unsuccessful. The fixing of women's communal identities would destroy their potential for moral agency, resistance and individual choice.

Henri Bergson's conceptualization of memory is interesting in this respect since it offers a unique perspective on individual consciousness and the concept of inner time. In sharp contrast to Maurice Halbwachs who emphasized the supremacy of a collective memory and claimed that human time is defined by chronological frameworks on which social groups agree, Bergson stressed on the richness and variety of inner subjective time. According to Halbwachs, a memory or narrative gathers a 'feeling of reality' if it is produced on the principle of impersonal time. Bergson countered this argument by suggesting that duration or time is fluid, without boundaries or limits and our intuitive perception of this time is the source of knowledge about the self. Memory preserves a person's own awareness of inner time which is not dictated by the chronology of history. It is a spontaneous and involuntary overflow. Bergson's notion of individual consciousness and subjective time is crucial to our understanding of personal agency and subjective experience.

The memory-identity which emerges through the oral and written narratives of women during the Bangladesh War sustains the lived quality of experience which may vary from subject to subject and is controlled by the individual's private conception of time. Although Halbwachs' theory that personal identity is dependent on socio-cultural structures holds true, our unique biographical situations serve as stocks of knowledge which allow us to refigure personal identity. In the event of a war or genocide, the dominant socio-cultural relations and the known world of everyday experience are faced with radical changes, shattering our objective perceptions of the external world. The shared world of common sense experience and knowledge which had framed the former self identity becomes indeterminate and chaotic due to the extremes of violence and pain suffered by the community. Although the present contains within itself the need for questioning meanings, values and judgements, once the event has passed, we become more

sensitively aware of the nuances of individual subjective experience. Rather than viewing collective memory as a socially accepted currency in determining individual identity, private or personal memory may also be developed as a means to understand both the maintenance and production of ourselves as persons who have a distinct past.

As established earlier, the testimonies of rape and violence in the context of the Bangladesh War are essentially characterized by the pursuit of meaning through an act of bearing moral witness and through private institutions of memory. These memories are profoundly particularistic as they chart unique trajectories of witnessing and experience and adopt various methods of meaning finding. The subject is marked off from others either as an individual or as a member of a group. Memory thus works to restore justice within the discrete, bounded confines of the victim's mind. The tension between individual memory-identity and collective social identity cannot be fully resolved since both the private and social dimensions of memory operate in equal measures to create notions of selfhood. However, it may be concluded that personal identity is largely influenced by the reflective choices that might be coherently coordinated in the private realm of the individual's memory. The construction of personal memory is such that it allows the individual to exercise a degree of control and sovereignty over issues of self identity. Therefore, the realignment of the present with the past and the fulfilment of future demands may be obtained more easily by laying claim to individual memorial practices.

The structure and history of the memoir, in its cyclic form of repression and repeated reappearance of trauma, bear testimony to a historical truth, that is, in itself entangled with the political struggle between the victim and dominant state institutions. Representational politics within a specific socio cultural context renders the experience of women as unspeakable. Their accounts of trauma are balanced at the intersection of stigma and untellability and often coded with a gendered understanding of guilt and self blame. The memoirs often reflect not only a history of loss, but the impossibility of the woman to write her own history. Cathy Caruth asserts that, "The truth of the woman's story...emerges not only in the power of its reference, but in the address that enacts the impossibility of her history."⁸¹ Through the process of fragmentation,

⁸¹ Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1996), 40-41.

disassociation and devaluation, the subject however, opens up the possibility of an alternate history, which can then enter into a dialogue with the existing framework of social history.

(2.5) The politics of representation: Women in the history of the Bangladesh genocide

The memoirs written by women during the Bangladesh War reveal multiple minds and multiple histories which cannot be subject to a single standard; but they are not mutually exclusive either. They form a collective kinship wherein diverse accounts of struggle, loss and pain are tied to a common socio historical denominator. The written memoirs and collections of oral testimony enable a form of solidarity by appealing to a group-based identity and strengthening gender representation. However, they do not simply recognize a shared historical experience but reflect the heterogeneity of those experiences as well. These memoirs are framed as a result of an interaction between intellectual and cultural traditions which shape the nature of remembrance and the writing of the narrative.

Despite their seemingly unified texture as a collective body of work, these memoirs often create openings in places where new understandings of personal identity emerge. They highlight the importance of analyzing radically different meanings of trauma and reinterpreting individual narratives and identities that do not retain essentialism. These points of departure or distinction within the collective body of texts and testimonies suggest that the perspective of the subject is marked by their own intensity, social depth and meaning. Although these specific representations of the past traverse a common spectrum of historical experience, they are individually distinctive in recording a private world of past experience, which differs on the basis of class, ethnicity and religion.

Having now established the space of individual identity formation in the memoirs and testimonies of war and genocide, it is critically important to reflect upon the issue of self representation as it emerges through the narrative. As discussed earlier in the analysis of Nayanika Mookherjee's *The Spectral Wound: Sexual Violence, Public Memories, and the*

Bangladesh War of 1971, the representation of the ‘birangona’ or raped woman has undergone significant changes in recent times. The testimonies of rape survivors have essentially made the stigmatized, demonized individual real in the face of fictionalized narrative accounts constructed by the state or religious institutions. From a critical point of view, the victim’s testimony provides evidence not only of the crime but also the changes it produces in the socio-cultural reception of the raped woman. Rape becomes a site of cultural contestation and struggle.

Although an oral or written testimony thwarts the dangers of misrepresentation as the witness speaks directly without any mediation, it bares the speaker to cultural value judgements which undermine the purpose of self representation.

The testimony is subject to assessments of relevance, importance, appropriateness and entitlement, wherein the subject undergoes a process of cultural stereotyping. The image of the ‘birangona’ that emerges through these narratives is far from heroic in the public eye, rather it reinforces the cultural representation of the raped woman as unbalanced, physically and psychologically debilitated. Mookherjee in her book, *The Spectral Wound*, comments on the popular representations of the ‘birangona’ by alluding to an iconic photograph of a rape victim by Bangladeshi photographer, Naibuddin Ahmed. The image of the ‘birangona’ with thick mangled hair, her hands covering her face is revealing not only of the shame and trauma but also the resistance towards any form of public recognition or self representation.

Sensationalizing the victim through public discourses such as visual or literary media, in a way, renders the trauma and violence less experiential and real. Proper contextualization is the key to a truthful representation, however, no matter how much context is provided actualizing and representing with the power of presence becomes problematic. Conceptualizing the rape victim as a subject who lacks the capacity for self representation regressively reinforces the power relations, which identifies the survivor as the ‘Other’. The politics of representation becomes even more potent if it is analyzed in relation to the state reintegration programmes designed for the rehabilitation of the ‘birangona’. The ‘marry them off’ campaign reveals the fallacy of the situation, wherein the raped woman must once again be drawn into the network of patriarchal relations in order to construct a new identity and find representation within existing socio-cultural structures.

According to Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak, (1988) only by altering the power relations that construct the subaltern can the subaltern speak in a way that carries the authority to alter relations of subalternity. The testimonies of 'birangonas' in this respect call for a re appropriation of control and voice by reasserting their power of self representation. The representational problem of speaking for the 'other' is based on the notion that the subject's social location and position have a significant impact on how her speech is received. Discourse analysis reveals that 'who' says something can drastically affect how it gets heard. The State legitimizes its function as the privileged speaker, speaking on behalf of the less privileged, thus serving the purpose of perpetuating existing power relations between itself and its citizens. By re-appropriating her narrative, the victim regains discursive power and establishes her unique position as her own ethnographer. This allows her to achieve a level of representative control not afforded to the female subject in state testimonies and documents.

As mentioned earlier, the problem of self representation is not simply restricted to issues of position, content and the context of words. It depends equally on the socio-cultural reception of the raped woman. It is thus crucial to examine where the speech goes and what impact it has there. The testimonies of rape victims are burdened by the experiences of trauma and violence, which naturally inhibit speech. Although these accounts seek to empower the subject by exerting a degree of control over their representations, they also contain within themselves the vulnerability and shame of victimhood, which at once places the subject's speech in a realm of subalternity within a specific socio-cultural context. The materiality of violence and trauma which is difficult to express in words and often shrouded by textual silences renders the victims as passive and helpless.

The risk of self representation entails that the victims are reduced to spectacles of victimization and violence in the public consciousness rather than being acknowledged as survivors who are capable of scripting their life stories. The language of rape and dominant mechanisms of gendered subjectivity are often lost in the process of cultural translation. It is possible that the speech may be converted over time and thus find greater sympathetic identification in the future, but the act of self disclosure in the testimonies of rape victims is often met with an overtly critical reader response at the time and space of its occurrence, thus minimizing the import of representation. The crisis of self representation therefore reminds us not only of the limits of

narratability but also the sociological, political and material forces which function as sources of resistance towards the rhetoric of rape and violence.

The analysis of rape and violence in the Bangladesh Liberation War cannot rest on gender alone. Gender has been refracted through a multiplicity of other factors such as ethnicity, religion and nationality. The 1971 War witnessed a debunking of rigid gender patterns which led to women publically talking about rape in an effort to raise consciousness about their role in the ‘Muktijuddho’. The stories of rape are drawn out of the province of male desire and domination towards a realization of gender, power and politics. The official accounts of wartime rape and violence explicate the sexual and ethno-cultural mastery of the Pakistani army over the bodies of women, who were vulnerable to assault due to their gender and position. Nayanika Mookherjee in her article, “Gendered Embodiments: Mapping the Body-Politic of the Raped Woman and the Nation in Bangladesh” (2008) addresses the issue of the woman’s position with respect to the predominant middle class aesthetics/ sensibility operational in Bangladesh.

“Within the constructs of the essentialized Bengali identity that emerged in the context of the progressive liberation struggle, the role of women comes to be framed and legitimized only within the domestic paradigm.”⁸²

She locates within this domestic paradigm certain inherent contradictions of morality and finds it entirely lacking in the principle of inclusivity with respect to women who have been raped. The middle class aesthetic which makes claims of progressiveness and liberalism becomes problematic due to the ‘hypocritical value judgements and moral positions’ which place the raped woman in the realm of social taboo and transgression.

The testimonies of rape victims constantly negotiate with these invisible ideologies and hypocrisies to create narratives, which disrupt the ethos of middle class morality. By speaking openly of the crimes committed, these narratives dismantle the social and ideological practices of the middle class and their posturing of modernity by defying accepted gender norms and subjectivities. The rape narratives, replete with experiences of trauma such as nightmares, phobia,

⁸² Nayanika Mookherjee, “Gendered Embodiments: Mapping the Body Politic of the Raped Woman and the Nation in Bangladesh”, *Feminist Review*, no. 88 (War, 2008): 38, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30140874>.

fear of sex, avoidance of men, fear of public spaces lie at odds with national interests and hegemonic masculinities which seek to aestheticize the experience and reflect the ‘glamour and sorrow’ of the liberation struggle.

Nayanika Mookherjee explains how rape came to be recognized as an explicitly ethno-cultural act in the context of the Bangladesh Liberation War.

“One of the main reasons cited by the middle class and cultural elites for the prevalence of rapes during the Muktiyuddho was that since Bengali Muslims were considered as ‘Indianized/Hinduized’ and only as ‘nominal Muslims’ by the Pakistani authorities, rape was seen as a means to ‘improve the genes of the Bengali Muslims’ and to populate Bangladesh with a new breed of ‘pure’ Pakistanis.”⁸³

Cultural narratives thus became fundamental to social and political life as a means of understanding the cause of rape rather than the effect. The middle class and political elites sought to focus on the romantic nostalgic picturization of Mother Bengal ravaged by enemies, her honour tainted and her purity defiled. Popular representations of the nation as a mother figure or ‘janani’ dressed in her ‘molin boshon’ (soiled or tarnished appearance) entered into public circulation through media and literature arousing sentiments of nationalism and pity instead of expressing the painful and personal violation of rape. The imaginary and symbolic representation of the ‘birangona’ responded to certain expectations of genre and structure which the cultural narratives had scripted. The cultural fantasy surrounding the figure of the raped woman thus contradicted the realness of her experience and defined specific gender roles and categories.

Mookherjee observes, “The metaphorical extension of images of motherhood from the household to the ‘imagined community’ of the nation is visible in the ‘Shaheed Minar’ (Martyr’s Memorial), a statue of a mother and her children.”⁸⁴ The explicit connotation of rape and gender violence does not enter into the realm of public or historical iconography and remains disguised both rhetorically and physically in the image of the idealized mother figure. According to Mookherjee, “It is only the image of the nurturing and sacrificing woman, as mother, wife, or

⁸³ Nayanika Mookherjee, “Gendered Embodiments: Mapping the Body Politic of the Raped Woman and the Nation in Bangladesh”, *Feminist Review*, no. 88 (War, 2008): 45, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30140874>.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 45.

nurse that is authorized by the discourse of Muktiyuddho.”⁸⁵ Women lack an element of control or agency even within the context of the violent act of rape, which appears in public discourse through the lens of the grieving brother or father, whose sister or daughter have experienced the same.

It may be argued that the memoirs and testimonies of rape victims do not cohere to gendered patterns of victimhood or motherhood and are marked by the subject’s refusal to be enshrined in public memory as glorified figures of the nation’s cultural integrity.

These realist strategies often do not operate as conscious forms of resistance in the personal narratives of rape or trauma. However, a model of self agency is seen developing through these stories, which unequivocally creates a psychological space that lies outside of culture and national discourse. The rape victim cannot psychologically partake in the process of a gendered embodiment and finds it difficult to prescribe to the notions of respectability which the State seeks to offer through exaggerated cultural representations of the ‘birangona’. Rape or physical violation also incapacitates the victim from feeling motherhood’s emotional and affective intensity. The raped woman is placed outside the realm of kinship ties because of the shame associated with the crime. Therefore, she cannot fit into the middle class domestic paradigm which legitimizes her presence within dominant social structures.

According to Mookherjee, “The mothering of the raped woman locates the ‘birangona’ within the realm of respectability. The domesticity intrinsic to motherhood makes her image acceptable and hence available to the instrumentality of the nation.”⁸⁶ The subject’s self agency, however, does not emerge from this projection of communality and empathy, a projection informed by culturally contingent notions of respectability and domesticity. Rather, it is the autobiographical nature of the testimonies which sets a vivid and painful example of contradictory embodiments in the context of sexual violence.

⁸⁵Nayanika Mookherjee, “Gendered Embodiments: Mapping the Body Politic of the Raped Woman and the Nation in Bangladesh,” *Feminist Review*, no. 88 (War, 2008): 45, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30140874>.

⁸⁶*Ibid.*, 45.

Although the victim's agency appears to pivot on the symbolic order of the patriarchal system, these narratives serve to dislodge the heterosexist, cultural assumptions that men are protectors and women the protected. The glorification of the maternal paradoxically reveals the implicit failure of the men to protect the women. The traditionalist middle class Bengali culture which is eager to ascribe roles of domesticity and motherhood to rape victims is faced with the issue of their own inability to protect the honour of their women. The State which postures as the caring parent, concerned for the fate of its women, is thus seen as delivering only a symbolic performance in the aftermath of the crime.

The memoirs and testimonies written by women during the war serve to debunk the cultural politics of rape by providing internalized accounts of trauma and pain, which bring into focus complexities of race, class and sexuality. The 1971 Bangladesh genocide witnessed the mass rape of women, who were not spared on the basis of religion or class hierarchy.

Yet, the accounts of rape which were unearthed in the 1990's by social workers involved in the rehabilitation of raped women reveal a diversity of experience: while a large section of women were forced into sexual slavery catering to the wanton needs of Pakistani troops who confined them in local camps, some were given preferential treatment by having to serve the pleasures of a single high ranking officer or a select few, yet others were victims of random encounter where they happened to fall in the path of the Pakistani army raiding villages and towns. Women were forcefully drawn out of their homes by the army and sent back after a few days once the need was fulfilled, others were rescued by Bangladeshi and Indian armed forces from rape camps, where they had been kept in captivity for months.

The diversity of these accounts cannot be attested by the cultural narratives which seek to valorise the 'sacrifice' of women by systematically solidifying their position as nurturing wives and mothers. I argue that the identification of the raped woman as a 'mother', on the contrary, serves as a reductive label which prevails to ameliorate the brutality of the crimes committed and facilitate the process of a collective forgetting.

CHAPTER 3: ‘AMI BIRANGONA BOLCHI’: THE LIFE OF THE ‘BIRANGONA’

(3.1) Reconstructing the ‘birangona’s’ history: The analysis of everyday life and experience

This chapter will develop on the central issue of the ‘birangona’ or war heroine and her private history which is obscured through the formation of dominant state narratives. Through an exploration of the everyday experiences of the birangona, this chapter will provide an alternative paradigm of historical interpretation. The oral narratives of the birangonas have the potential to challenge and transform the practices of collective remembering. The chapter will explore selected testimonies from Nilima Ibrahim’s *Ami Birangona Bolchi*, with a special focus on the stories of Mrs. Tara Neilson and Meherjaan. Interspersed with these two narratives, are the voices of women survivors who have journeyed through similar trajectories of experience from the book, *Rising from the Ashes*.

Although history has been one of the main disciplines through which we can understand gender, it has been firmly rooted in historical records and temporal causation. Danish social anthropologist, Kirsten Hastrup observes that the nature of historical anthropology immediately rests on the nature of ‘time’, which has often been viewed as a linear phenomenon by Western philosophers. Hastrup argues that the apparent unity of history as linear and causative is a discursive rather than a social fact, since analysis reveals the non-synchronicity and discontinuity of social experience. “In the social life of people, tradition and change are two sides of the same coin, not separate entities with distinct historicities.”⁸⁷

⁸⁷ Kirsten Hastrup, introduction to *Other Histories*, ed. Kirsten Hastrup (London: Routledge, 1992), 3.

According to Hastrup, anthropologists appear to deal in space and historians in time, but historical anthropology must seek to explore the ‘state’ which is obtained in a particular time-space. In order to understand the complexity of ‘modern’ histories and examine the objective conditions which are matched by a subjective reality, the intersection of history and memory becomes central to the study of historical anthropology. Anton Blok in the essay, ‘Reflections on ‘making history’’ echoes Hastrup in his claim that “For events to become a part of “history” they have to be or to have been experienced as significant.”⁸⁸

Formerly, only records provided acceptable historical evidence, but from the perspective of anthropology, recollections are equally valid, given that in both, culture is significant. Ranajit Guha in his seminal work, *Subaltern Studies: Writings on South Asian History and Society* moved away from the conventional sources of history towards a reconstruction of the worlds of subaltern experience. In other words, he expressed a need to understand subaltern experiences as a series of self-enclosed fragments which possess their own integrity and attain historical meaning on their own terms, without having to place them within larger historical narratives and processes.

In recent years, anthropology has been influenced by a ‘literary turn’ leading to a growth of interest in personal narratives including life histories, biographies and autobiographies. Over the last quarter of a century, historians have been engaged in the process of rescuing women of the past from their invisibility in traditional records. This work of recovery and retrieval has made possible the redefinition of ‘history’ to include aspects of life previously seen as ‘non-historical’; they were seen as natural and therefore timeless and unchanging, especially family relations, domesticity and sexuality. The importance of reconstructing women’s history is clear enough, it allows for the retrieval of life stories as they themselves conceptualize and tell them: real people, real lives as opposed to the monopolized historical accounts of gender relations in private and public life.

Feminist scholarship has clearly shown the interconnections between the private domestic worlds in which women act, and the public world where they operate as cultural symbols.

⁸⁸ Anton Blok, “Reflections on ‘making history,’” in *Other Histories*, ed. Kirsten Hastrup (London: Routledge, 1992), 121.

The personal narratives and life histories of women reveal the complex construction of self, including that of the gendered self, as well as the relationship between the individual and society. Further, they demonstrate how the semantic structures of religion, culture, and ideology interact with social, political and economic structures. Most importantly, personal narratives bind the ‘micro’ and ‘macro’ aspects of cultural historiography leading to the evocation of a general social experience.

The rise of women’s history has been closely linked with the discovery of everyday life. The history of everyday life has fostered awareness of sources that were previously more or less neglected: first of all oral histories, but also diaries, private letters, photograph albums. The interest in everyday life and ‘micro-worlds’ has brought these personal records into prominence on the historiographical stage. Although, the individual is at the centre of attention, these memoirs have shown that everyday life and daily procedures reflect the social order and make historical processes visible. In this context, Michel de Certeau in *The Practise of Everyday Life* outlined a ‘science of singularity’ which he defined as a

...science of the relationships that links everyday pursuits to particular circumstances.

And only in the local network of labour and recreation can one grasp how, within a grid of socio economic constraints, these pursuits unfailingly establish relational tactics (a struggle for life), artistic creations (an aesthetic), and autonomous initiatives (an ethic).

The characteristically subtle logic of these ‘ordinary’ activities comes to light only in the details.⁸⁹

The analysis of everyday life in these narratives magnifies the scale of observation bringing into focus issues of class and gender which are often overlooked in defining a macro-history. The history of everyday life has shown that ‘ordinariness’ is neither simple nor banal but a realistic alternative to master narratives of progress, rationality and modernization. Further, by uncovering the microphysics of power, these narratives have revealed the real dynamics of social systems which have fallen into tautologies and pre established models of reference.

⁸⁹ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkley: University of California Press, 1984), faculty.georgetown.edu/.../DeCerteau-Practice-Excerpt...

Although the main problem with macro-oriented analysis is the static structure of the models it proposes, in which an improbable coherence and linearity are ascribed to ongoing historical processes, the history of everyday life entails the danger that it may focus on a singular phenomena or subject without taking into consideration all aspects of the historical context; it cannot see the wood for the trees. However, the personal narratives or biographies are successful in dissolving the dualistic dead-end between subject and society, of individual and structure because they are conceptualized as a social construct which constitutes social reality as well as the subject's world of knowledge and experience.

This social construct permanently transforms itself within the dialectical relationship between biographical experiences and knowledge on the one hand and larger social patterns on the other. Their presentation is often dialogic rather than purely retrospective, taking the form of direct speech. The autobiographical self is not in any sense individualistic but relational, communal, and connected to others through time, place and social experience.

The complexity of everyday life influences the form of the biography. Any reconstruction is selective; it is driven by specific motives, objectives, systems or values, and is filtered by the subject's state of mind or life situation. The mode of self portrayal, the choice of references, the qualification and quantification of time, the relation between the concealed, encoded and openly represented events and their subjective interpretation are constituted within specific cultural and individual contexts. The creation of a 'social biography' through life stories and personal narratives thus becomes a challenging task because they choose to reflect on the dimensions of everyday life rather than critically reconstructing the historical circumstances leading to social change. Writing the history of everyday life requires us to think in open systems, in which readers deal with a multitude of competing versions of history. This polyphony in everyday life history shows that it is possible to live with contradictions without falling into arbitrariness.

The life histories of Bangladeshi women written during the Liberation War of 1971 locate stories in particular lived realities; they emphasize the agency of human actors in their daily lives; and they dwell in these stories as a way to narrate a private history. Through integrative interpretations of the seemingly transparent practices of everyday life, their history becomes an assertion of the human agency. Taken together, the history of everyday life is thus never just about those persons of the past but also- and in an explicitly critical fashion- about all of us in the

present. It achieves temporal integration not by reducing history either to an accounting for the current world or to utopian visions of alternate universes but by demonstrating pragmatic options through which ordinary people may shape their present.

Further, the history of everyday life achieves spatial integration neither in cross cultural comparisons or in basic summation but by analyzing organic relationships between social phenomena in these multiple accounts of everyday life. In effect, our recasting of these strategies of everyday life history removes this protest epistemology from its original context (The Liberation War of Bangladesh in 1971) and applies it more universally as an epistemological strategy for framing a critical history in the twenty-first century.

Geoff Eley in the foreword to *The Challenge of Modernity: German Social and Cultural Studies 1890-1960*, writes that,

“Every-day life historians created a “third space” *between* the older institutional accounts of labor history and the structural approaches to industrialization and working class formation preferred by social science historians.”⁹⁰

These spaces are crucial in understanding the behaviours and attitudes of ordinary working class people themselves, “In the informal settings of working class everydayness, in families, households, streets, neighbourhood, bars, and recreational spaces, as well as in the manifold contexts of the workplace.”⁹¹

The personal narratives and memoirs of women writing during the period of the Liberation War of Bangladesh in 1971 create new spaces, both literal and metaphorical, in which a more sophisticated appraisal of the potentials and difficulties of progressive national politics may be located. Every location contains within itself specific patterns of sociability and subjectivity, and is ultimately social in nature since it is a product of human labour, gestures and interactions. The representation of private spaces in the narratives of women reflects how they adapt, engage,

⁹⁰ Geoff Eley, foreword to *The Challenge of Modernity: German Social and Cultural Studies 1890-1960*, trans. Bruce Little (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2002), xiii.

⁹¹ Ibid. xiii.

shape and experience these places and creates the opportunity of finding a ‘third space’ wherein their political potential and communal identity may be explored.

According to Eley, “By pushing historical analysis into these experiential or subjective domains...the conceptual and instituted boundaries between the “public” and “private” might be broken down and new ways of connecting the political and cultural realms worked out.”⁹²

A close scrutiny of a physical space may also shed light on how the concept of ‘community’ was imagined and how it functioned. Understanding how and why subjects ascribed certain meanings to local sites enables us to make sense of how communities functioned. What might appear to be a public location, such as a park or market may be central to the local neighbourhood culture because it is considered to be semiprivate by the residents who use it for a variety of purposes. The contours of community may be drawn on the lines of physical space since everyday locations are instrumental in defining power relationships and unravelling group identities.

The personal narratives of women are not strictly restricted to the home, courtyard or kitchen; common stops in the daily routine of the subject hold a variety of meanings that are often in play simultaneously leading to a privatization of space and appropriation of these local sites. However, the home remains the primary site of ever-changing individual identities with an increasingly complex vision of social and cultural factors continuously under construction.

The narratives of everyday life also reflect upon those who can enter this realm and those who only have the opportunity to look in from outside. In a traditionalist Muslim culture such as that in Bangladesh this distinction holds critical relevance. There are multiple identities and multiple behaviours at play when one enters the threshold depending on the dynamic inhabitation of each of these places. The private rooms located in the interior remain largely inaccessible to the male subject as they are generally the domain of women. Upon entering, one picks up cues from the symbols they encounter and combine this information with the accepted codes of behaviour and conduct.

Keeping location central reminds us of the inter-subjective nature of identity formation and the possibilities of cultural practice that are enacted on each occasion of entering or exiting. The

⁹² Geoff Eley, foreword to *The Challenge of Modernity: German Social and Cultural Studies 1890-1960*, trans. Bruce Little (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2002), xii.

physical space entered may be seemingly straightforward, but the experience of entering any location varies by individual and varies for that individual according to occasion, thus forcing a constant renegotiation of physical conditions, the possibilities for action and the nature of the place itself. The material conditions of daily existence shift from the outer world of social reality to the interior world of private experience. It involves many outside forces such as cosmopolitan ideologies, national politics and global issues. Although the everyday histories of women reveal an awareness of larger phenomena, nonetheless are primarily concerned with how they are implemented and appropriated on the level of everyday practice. Space, therefore is treated not in terms of spatial proximity but in terms of the individual's own ability to access and apply multiple frames of reference within and across the particular location of a historical event.

The history of everyday life works closely with the categories of ordinary experience but must also engage them critically. Our collective perception of everyday life seems to depend on our mutual assertions of its normalcy. Extraordinary events are therefore shocking as they interrupt these claims to ordinary life. The extraordinary however reinforces the ordinary through a ritual process which restores 'order' at its end, though rarely in the same form as before. These extraordinary events debunk the popular myths of normalcy that veil everyday life and protect the ordinary person. In the event of a war, everyday life and routine suffers a setback. Oppressive circumstances can change the ritualistic structure and continuity of regular life, challenging the fundamental social coherence and disrupting the naturalized behaviour of a particular social group.

Extraordinary events such as war and violence temporarily supersede the limits of the mundane everyday world as a way to create or re-imagine individual and communal identity. Although temporary, the alternative form of social organization caused by war offers the potential for critically rethinking the ways in which the individual moves through the places of his or her daily life. The event of war causes the individual to break apart from the organized structure of society and the rituals which dictate everyday life. But essentially both the structure and the anti-structure, the ordinary and the extraordinary remain a part and parcel of everyday life which ordinary people participate in; crafting new forms of social transformation.

In the context of mass politics, war challenges the existing hegemony and comfortable dichotomies of power and resistance which are a part of everyday life. It provides individuals the

means to take their potential power outside the ritualized displays of hegemony within their society to abstract, grand-scale, impersonal systems of new hegemony which are imposed upon the people by foreign forces. More precisely, through a wide variety of behaviours, individuals hide their claims for status and power in the nature of everyday life and in existing social relationships in order to deal with the imperatives of political domination and the forces of circumstance caused by war.

Both elites and outsiders benefit from disguising the nature of everyday life, as if ordinary people had no role in shaping it. But reducing the investigation of war time societies, to the study of aggregate groups and institutions would be to deny the agency of everyday ordinary people for making that collective world. Repressing the narratives of women and their everyday world would reflect a stubborn aloofness on the part of historians to integrate their stories in understanding the nature of social relations, power and politics. Their interests, needs and commitments are inherent to the way people tried to live their lives. By constructing historical narratives in which real people made use of the chance to shape their present, we draw out the human consequences of those actions.

Sociologist, Michel Maffesoli in his work, *The Time of the Tribes: The Decline of Individualism in Mass Society* coined the term ‘sociality’ to express the notion that smaller social units become the centre of sociological analysis in modern societies as opposed to larger organized groups. Sociality refers to the miniscule rituals, temporary micro-groupings at the level of lived reality with which we can form a sense of identification or solidarity. Maffesoli considered these minor groups as starting points of analysis as they constitute the everyday foundations of power. Maffesoli viewed these temporary forms of sociality as an expression of ‘puissance’ or a “will to live” that shapes both the formal and informal institutions of society and therefore is instrumental in shaping history. Sociality evokes a sentiment of spontaneous social bonding and allows ordinary people to challenge the authority of structural epistemologies, which often overlook the capacity of minority groups in contributing to the topography of the collective social world.

The production of history through the narratives of women echo a spirit of sociality which constantly seeks to reconstitute the social landscape through an ongoing series of negotiations and contestations. Although their history of everyday life plays out on the radically small scale of micro-history, there is no doubt that these individual histories collate to form a stable, coherent,

knowable whole. Following their stories reveals a trajectory of how deeds become habits and how habits shape events, experience and memory.

(3.2) Writing micro-histories and reading the memoir

Sheila Fitzpatrick writes that, “People understand and remember their lives in terms of stories. These stories make sense of the scattered data of ordinary life, providing context, imposing a pattern that shows where one has come from and where one is going.”⁹³

But the everyday life histories of women are not merely a retelling of a collection of ‘little’ stories rather it gives us a theatre of operation in which to understand what is said or not said, done or not done in the reconstruction of the past experience. There are certain commonalities in the series of stories retelling a particular historical event. They often fall prey to the master narratives or plot structures recurring insistently within a culture. But the scattered nature of ordinary life and events perhaps makes this construction necessary for the purpose of narrating a coherent autobiography.

In either case, it is the task of the historian to interpret one fragment in the context of other fragments. Walter Benjamin emphasized on the importance of interpreting the fragments rather than the ‘story’ or narrative while reading history.

According to Benjamin, history “breaks down into partial images, not into complete stories” and the effort is to “detect the crystal of the total event in the analysis of the small, individual moment.”⁹⁴ Lingering on these minute details of an everyday history becomes the focus of inquiry in order to fit these seemingly small gestures and actions into their larger contexts. In this way of reading, the narratives of women may assume a role of historical importance despite the incomplete or fragmentary nature of narration.

⁹³ Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism: Ordinary Life in Extraordinary Times; Soviet Russia in the 1930's* (Oxford, 1999), 8.

⁹⁴ Walter Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland, Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 35.

In the context of the Bangladesh Liberation War, the personal narratives of women have allowed the inclusion of new ‘voices’ in the canon of autobiographies and testimonial narratives written during this period. Nilima Ibrahim, whose interviews and dialogues with Bangladeshi women have brought their individual and collective stories to the attention of a wide public, feels that women are ideally suited to this literary venture. She claims that the purpose of her work, *Ami Birongona Bolchi* (1988) is to honour the suffering of the women, including the dead, to restore memory and voice to the survivors and their communities, to interpret in the process some of the causes of the atrocities with the hope of promoting healing and reconciliation.

Her work includes narrative accounts of rape and other acts of terror and torture collected from women who lived through the conflict. The testimonies of rape survivors are reported as they are told, without the formal tone of social-scientific reporting. The compassionate reader finds it difficult to draw back, to some extent, from the disturbing details of these accounts. However, women who live with an acute awareness of their vulnerability to sexual violence may respond to rape narratives differently than men who do not feel the same kind or degree of vulnerability. Female readers may more often cast themselves in the role of the woman, while male readers may more often oscillate between empathizing with the women and forming an association of guilt with the rapist in the sense of recognizing, on some level of awareness, that nearly all men by virtue of their sex and gender could potentially be rapists, under certain circumstances.

The personal narrative form, set within the broader, collective narrative, beckons the reader into the horror of sexual violence. Anger and disgust are likely responses, as are sadness and compassion for the victim. Fear and shame might also enter the mix. It is common for such emotions to arise in complex and shifting configurations, reflecting the different dimensions of the situation and also differences within individuals who confront or fail to confront these dimensions, conditioned by different life experiences. As the reader progresses through the testimonies and are led into psychological, sociological; and other forms of reflection, a rape narrative might continue to haunt them emotionally, but the form of authentic ‘reporting’ adopted by Ibrahim creates some mental space within which to reconsider and re-enter the emotional dimension of their experience. Readers are implicitly invited to revisit their emotions in the light of the author’s goal of personal and communal healing.

Ibrahim's work is produced in such a way that it permits the readers to become conscious of and to honour the painful emotions experienced by rape victims. At the same time, the text encourages us to take responsibility for these emotions. Ibrahim says in her prefatory remark that it is not enough to simply read through the emotions of the narrative, it is necessary to use these emotions as a starting point for searching moral inquiry. She requests her readers to refrain from seeking the identity or address of these women, since it would only serve to re-awaken the painful emotions and humiliation experienced by them. She therefore urges her readers to set aside for the time being their own preoccupations with testing the historical accuracy of these narratives and instead surrender to the text emotionally.

Ibrahim's preface to *Ami Birangona Bolchi* begins with an apology to her readers for being unable to publish the third volume of the book. She identifies the primary reason for this inability to be a 'physical' one. Writing about rape can be mind numbing according to Ibrahim, since one unfathomable horror is followed by another. The structure of the book itself reveals the problem. It is framed as a continuous, uninterrupted series of rape stories without the luxury of a chapter break. Implicitly, Ibrahim asks her readers to enter into solidarity with her and with the victims who report their stories. As readers, we are led to sympathize with Ibrahim's horror and frustration with the systematic torture inflicted upon her people and particularly her gender. Thus, despite the effort to maintain an authorial distance from the testimonies collected, Ibrahim is tacitly drawn into the complex network of painful emotions and experiences shared by the victims.

The author, who is engaged in an extended process of collecting memory and documenting the life stories of her subjects; therefore also engages in a form of self-disclosure, which clarifies her own political and moral goals to the readers. The experiential narratives of rape and trauma can draw the readers into powerful encounters with the victims who have lived through them. These narratives expose the readers to the interior lives of the subjects whose reality have been completely altered by the actions of others. Simultaneously, it also allows the readers to question the motives and aspirations of the author in framing these oral narratives into a written text.

Ibrahim's *Ami Birangona Bolchi* recounts the stories of seven 'birangonas'; it constitutes a mediation on, and an exploration of the position from which a first-person story of rape can be told. Narrating rape means alluding to the body as a sexual object, it entails the effect of almost

repeating the rape by conjuring up images of the woman's sexualized body that reveal it again to unwanted public scrutiny. This is perhaps one of the reasons why Ibrahim advocates secrecy of the subject's identity in the preface to her book. The woman describing her sexualized body struggles to fit neatly into the position of a witness prescribed to her. Therefore, a dialogue between the subject and the interviewer may not always yield the desired response. However, the possibility of narrating the experience of rape is context-dependent. The space provided to the victim in the course of a personal interview or a counselling session may provide a sense of ease wherein the subject is able to narrate the circumstances of rape not just as a self-conscious bodily performance but also as a linguistic production.

While it is important to read the individual narratives as they stand to represent the experiences of singular subjects, Ibrahim's book reveals that there is no single story of rape as such: rape is shown to be one part of a complex and tightly woven narrative of the 'birangona's' struggle to come to terms with and inhabit her own sexed body and to present a coherent self through the disruptions and confusions. The text does not invite us to smooth out or cure the gaps and inconsistencies in their stories or to decide whether she is or is not reliable as a witness, but rather to analyze the narrative of rape as a narrative rooted in the relation with the sexed and gendered body.

Ibrahim reports the context of her interviews in the preface to her book.

In 1972, after the victory of the Liberation Army, when Pakistani prisoners of war were being deported to India, I found out that around 30-40 raped women were also leaving with them. Without delay, I contacted the Indian Foreign Relations Officer in charge, Brigadier Ashok Dora and the appointed Bangladeshi administrative official, Marhum Nurul Momen Khan, whom we knew as Mihir, for their assistance. Both of them facilitated our meeting with these women with great sympathetic understanding. Dhaka University lecturer, Nowshaba Sharafi, Dr. Sharifa Khatun and I, went to the army headquarters to meet these women and gathered a traumatic experience.⁹⁵

⁹⁵ Nilima Ibrahim, *Ami Birangona Bolchi* (Dhaka: Jagriti Prokashoni, 2010), 3.

Through her meeting with these women, the author is able to identify a predictable pattern of responses which originate in an acute reaction when the memory is triggered and ultimately culminate in an outward adjustment. The challenge on the part of the interviewer is to encourage the victim to speak. To respond appropriately to the issues that are psychologically relevant to the victim, the interviewer must express a willingness to help her cope with both her feelings and her reality. Although an attitude of empathy, warmth and calmness is useful, the interview must not only reflect a personal involvement but also a professional objectivity. The effort to deal with the victim's emotional crisis as it manifests both in her behaviour and affect, involves the need to actively guide the subject through the interview instead of passively listening to her.

The 'birangona' who speaks must be given the space and linguistic authority to tell her story. Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak, crucially demonstrates that to gain a rudimentary understanding of the subaltern woman, the interlocutor must renounce the benefits of privilege. "When we come to the concomitant question of the consciousness of the subaltern, the notion of what the work *cannot* say becomes important." Spivak has forced us to apprehend the discomfiting lack of answers to the question, "Can the subaltern speak?" The construction of the figure of the subaltern and the role that she plays within a specific social context rests in the hands of the academic elite. Any form of unmediated speech or the act of self-evident utterance on the part of the subaltern is difficult since our ways of thinking radically transform agencies. The relationship between agency and subjectivity is inextricable; our identities are functions of the ways in which others construct us.

As such the raped woman locates her internal and social agency in relation to the gaze of the man, whose eyes reflect those religious ideals that paradoxically produce her as subject and commodity, and whose gaze is entirely regulated by patriarchal social systems.

The construction of female subjectivity often includes a loss of the subaltern woman's linguistic agency as she scrambles to learn the language and mechanisms of patriarchal power to transcend socially the stigma of being raped. She must necessarily assume the role of the 'birangona' in order to find a voice or express her plight. An identity-that of a raped woman-which has lost all use-value in the eyes of her relatives and society is exchanged through the bestowed title of 'war heroine' for a most practical use-value that reinforces socio-religious

ideologies. The exchange value of subjectivities which allows the ‘birangona’s’ story to be heard reflects how in both cases her agency is structured around a dependence on others’ will.

Ibrahim’s book glorifies these raped women as ‘birangonas’ conforming to the gendered subjectivity that entered popular discourse post 1971. As Spivak writes, “There is no more dangerous pastime than transposing proper nouns into common nouns, translating and using them as sociological evidence.”⁹⁶ This sets the intellectual in a rather bizarre position, and it is a position where simple multicultural liberalism cannot be the solution. Ibrahim chooses to play a communicative role which advocates not only a reading of these individual narratives but also a reading of culture by translating various conducts and modes of behaviour. Her work evokes the need to talk about culture as a multiplicity of trajectories. By adopting this open-ended view of discourse, the critic or academic is able to read culture based on the assumption that all actions are a form of communication and to construe such communication on its own terms.

The representation of the ‘birangona’ through intellectual discourse is not simply about giving voice, but concerned with constituting, working for and representing the positional relations of the subaltern to the dominant and vice-versa within a cultural context. The Western approach to the subaltern is either to speak for or to silently let them speak for themselves. But Ibrahim’s work facilitates a process of measuring the silences of the subaltern within the context where the subject is actually fixed. Spivak in her essay, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” argues that the case of Indian ‘sati’ is illustrative of how the subaltern cannot speak. She asks, “What did Sati say?” Can the subaltern be understood? Or is it always a “speaking for?”

In the context of Bangladesh, the subaltern or ‘birangona’ is framed either as a quisling or as a resistant. Her voice is never heard or understood since it lies beyond the political and cultural logic used to justify the events of 1971. The ‘birangona’s’ story is rarely integrated within the corpus of national war narratives. The ‘birangona’ operates more as a declarative term rather than an acknowledgement of their individual agency in the course of the war. The role of the intellectual voice in the construction of these radical identities is thus crucial. Spivak’s question essentially denies that an academic voice can be elevated to a point of enlightenment above the

⁹⁶ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Can the Subaltern Speak?: Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1988), 75.

shadows of history. Yet the works of the author has gone on to find ways of speaking ‘of’ the subject itself through interviews which have presented the subject to be most sensate of realities.

For Spivak, the critical voice (or any voice which speaks “about” the colonized) immediately suffers the distancing institutionality which fractures the ‘object’ of discourse from the voice that speaks it and which attempts to make its own simultaneous ‘subject’. In the case of Ibrahim and many other Bangladeshi women writers, there is a tendency of constantly feeling history as personal psychological trauma. The effort to break through the veneer of the ‘scholarly’ and integrate with the experiences of the subject brings them face to face with the evidence of their literal body politic. Experiencing the nightmare of loss, Ibrahim recognizes herself as alone, silent, inadequate, but ultimately valiant because she confronts and knows the abyss at the centre of her project.

Although the author cannot entirely be ‘of’ the people she communicates with, her sense of their corporeality as refracted through her own is useful enough to reflect the crisis which they live out.

Roland Barthes states in *Michelet* (1954) that in history-making, “words must be heard which were never spoken”⁹⁷. According to Barthes, history can be written through a self-consciously double order of signs, in which historical events as signifiers act as a sign system in themselves, revealing history as other historians write and read it, but also points to a mythological second order of signs which delineates the words of an embedded and “impossible language”. Barthes explains “I was born of the people, I have the people in my heart. The monuments of its olden days have been my delight...But the people’s language, its language was inaccessible to me. I have not been able to make the people speak.”⁹⁸

Barthes’ elaboration of the predicament of the historian hinges on his acceptance of what Spivak constantly reminds us of in “Can the Subaltern Speak?”: “the critic’s institutional responsibility.”⁹⁹ The historian owes this responsibility not simply to the discipline, to objectivity

⁹⁷ Roland Barthes, *Michelet*, trans. Richard Howard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 120.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 199.

⁹⁹ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Can the Subaltern Speak?: Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1988), 75.

or to disciplinary rigours but in a sense functions as a self-inflicted and continual need to remember and pay dues to the predicated foundation for the critical voice. Although Barthes does not present Michelet as entirely transparent yet he reflects on the historian's difficulty to break out of the connective fabric of "representation" which interweaves "the choice of and need for 'heroes'". Writing itself becomes a sort of bodily enterprise for Barthes. Writing history, bound by the strictures of representation is driven therefore by the movement to the material and bodily, set against a realization of the "impossible language" needed to conceive history.

The historian's duty according to Barthes is bound to voice words "never spoken". Moving towards the people and towards himself, the historian heroically empties the heroism of history and makes the text about the people instead of engaging in a process of valorization. The author's own corporeality and selfhood turns on its head the self-knowing of the intellectual, so that "the people", who are the source of his existence are transformed into historical facts from spectral realities.

Barthes states that "The historian is in fact a civil magistrate in charge of administering the estate of the dead."¹³ The 'birangona' is similarly extricated from the realm of the dead through the works of the Bangladeshi women writers, who make these forgotten women the site and receptor of their energies, while knowing the unbridgeable distance from themselves.

Barthes comments,

"History greets and renews these disinherited glories; it gives life to these dead men, resuscitates them. Its justice thus associates those who have not lived at the same time, offers reparation to some who appeared so briefly only to vanish. Now they live with us, and we feel we are their relatives, their friends. Thus is constituted a family, a city shared by the living and the dead."¹⁰⁰

However, Barthes' theory does not provide a solution to the question of how the act of representing "the people" can be made transparent, a question which Spivak seeks to clarify. Barthes claims that the impossible language of the subaltern people will always attract the

¹⁰⁰ Roland Barthes, *Michelet*, trans. Richard Howard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 82.

historian by choice and by necessity demanding absolute attention and framing himself as an intellectual. Their form of language may not be attained by the historian but it may be conveyed through the ‘warmth’ of memory, which according to Barthes “is more ‘linked together’ than all the writings of the legislators and witnesses.”¹⁰¹

Spivak contends that the intellectual ethics of oppression can be concretized by “a nostalgia for lost origins (which) can be detrimental to the exploration of social realities within the critique of imperialism”¹⁰² The subaltern is potentially always marginal and its marginality and exclusion (like the intellectual’s position from which it is spoken) becomes its own explanation and justification. Italian Marxist theorist, Antonio Gramsci redeems the subaltern from its position of marginality by conceptualizing the subaltern in terms of its “active and passive affiliation” to dominant formations. Gramsci foresees the subaltern as influencing “the programme of these formations [and to] press claims of their own.”¹⁰³ It therefore provides the cultural critic a potentially dynamic model through which cultural changes and the function of subaltern groups may be understood.

Gramsci’s subaltern is not located ‘outside’ history, rather is a part of historical processes which unfold within the system. Just as subaltern communities with their inherent ability to form active and passive affiliations are made a part of the system which simultaneously excludes them, the cultural critic or intellectual may also find his/her position both inside and outside the existing framework.

(3.3)The ‘Birangona’ speaks: Issues of self-representation

¹⁰¹Roland Barthes, *Michelet*, trans. Richard Howard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 102.

¹⁰² Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Can the Subaltern Speak?: Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1988), 75.

¹⁰³ Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. and trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1991), 52.

Nilima Ibrahim in *Ami Birangona Bolchi* seeks to address the complexities that these women live with, with their divided loyalties and the chiaroscuro of agency and powerlessness they straddle from day to day. The confessional mode these women adopt not only enables them to voice the culturally silenced abuses they have suffered, but also ambiguously enables them to voice their sense of 'shame' at being "bad wives" who abandon not only their husbands, but also their religious beliefs and their national allegiances. Most striking is the case of one Muslim victim, who chose to marry a Pakistani soldier, who had raped her, and migrate to Pakistan. In fact, Ibrahim's encounter with these women occurred when she decided to interview 30-40 Bangladeshi women who were set to leave the country with Pakistani prisoners of war rather than face the stigma and abandonment of society.

Ibrahim's interview does not create the burden of rationally proving that the rape experience was sufficiently coercive or life threatening for the victim to decide to leave. Nor does it attempt to fit her subject in the archetypal profile of the 'true victim' who exhibits a sense of outrage and refusal to negotiate with the perpetrators of the crime. She allows the subject to speak for herself. The decision to leave is predicated by the victim's own choice.

The testimonies of these women often reflect on rape as a crisis that is shared by the victim and her family. The way in which the family defines rape and the seriousness of the changes precipitated by it greatly influence the narratives of the victims. It is primarily one of the many reasons the victim desires to avoid any form of identification. The cultural view of rape is often related to the issue of externalization of blame for rape. Traditionally men have been responsible for the protection and control of women. The male, consciously or unconsciously may blame himself for having failed to protect the woman from rape. The testimonies of women collected by Ibrahim make 'family' an important variable related to rape in the deliberate silences which veil the family identity and inter-personal associations.

The focus rests on the experience of rape itself and the male presences in the narrative are initially restricted to the assailants or rapists. The task of the interviewer is to initiate a process of reconciliation, not just with the trauma of rape but with the family structure which the 'birangona' has abandoned, or which has conversely abandoned the 'birangona'. Within the given cultural context, perhaps the most crucial underlying and typically unstated issue is that the husband, father or brother views rape as primarily a sexual act rather than an act of violence.

Although recent research supports the view of rape as a violent act, cultural definitions still center around the view of rape as a sexual act. In the context of the Liberation War, it perhaps justifies the victim's decision to marry or leave with her rapist than return to the family. In the testimony of Meherjaan, her decision to leave the country with Layek Khan becomes a somewhat predictable and sequential pattern for the victim as opposed to Sarmila Bose's claim that it reflected the kindness and security offered by the Pakistani army officials.

The first account by Mrs. Neilson, who is later identified as Tara narrates the predicament of the raped woman:

Since I had endured unimaginable pain and torture for so many days, my head did not work properly. I did tell people repeatedly that I wanted to go to my father. But when they asked me my father's name, I just could not recall. I sat there and kept crying. It seemed I had lost part of my memory...After being there for three or four days, the doctor informed me that I was pregnant. They asked me where I wanted to go. I bit my lips and said I had no one. I told them to make the same arrangements they had made for other destitute girls. The female attending physician asked if I really had no relatives. I shook my head. She somehow understood.¹⁰⁴

Suddenly one day, Baba arrived. Baba looked like he had aged many years. He held me tight in a strong grip and burst into tears...I raised my face to him and asked him, "Baba, should I go home with you now? I have to tell the office that I'm leaving." Baba stopped and hesitated, and then said, "No, my sweet, I cannot take you today. The house is being rebuilt. Your mother's brother is visiting at the house now. Tomorrow your sister, Kali and her husband will come to visit. When they all leave, I will come and get you." Softly, I let go off my father's arm. "That's okay, Baba. Don't come again." "No, no", said Baba in hesitation. He gave me a bag of fruits. I didn't want to touch it. But I didn't want to become a laughing stock by throwing it away either. Baba came again, but never offered to take me home. Even my elder brother came from Calcutta with a new sari...One thing that my brother said that my father could not bring himself to tell me, "We will drop by

¹⁰⁴ Nilima Ibrahim, *Ami Birangona Bolchi* (Dhaka: Jagriti Prokashoni, 2010), 21.

and see you whenever we can. But please don't suddenly come home. You will shame us." The muscles of my face were so tense, I couldn't move my jaw. My brother noticed and quickly added, "Please don't send any letters to our address either."¹⁰⁵

What Nilima Ibrahim's work initiates is a conversation with memory and memorialisation while travelling through the difficult and varied terrains that women's political struggles and movements have taken in Bangladesh post 1971. Her interviews go beyond the nationalistic discourse of the aggressor and the victim, to a deeper awareness of how violence continues to haunt women's lives even after the end of a conflict. Ibrahim has contributed both as a researcher and as a participant to reveal how patriarchal structures that permeate Bengali society have both helped to trigger and institutionalize values that legitimized sexual violence.

Meghna Guhathakurta in her essay, "Locating Sexual Violence and Impunity" states that,

"The 1971 Liberation War was somewhat foundational in shaping the subsequent discourse on sexual violence in Bangladesh. Women activists and scholars had a two-pronged struggle to wage when addressing issues of rape and violence. The first was to inscribe women's proactive role in the war into a male-dominant nationalist paradigm of history, as well as to redefine rape and sexual violence as visible crimes against humanity from a feminist perspective."¹⁰⁶

She reflects on how the experiences of women during the war often cannot be understood through the lens of nationalism. The daunting question of why scores of Bangladeshi women chose to flee the country with their rapists than stay back with their family and society may be explored through an analysis of the gendered notion of sexuality in Bengali society and how they reproduce feelings of shame and guilt for the rape victims.

Guhathakurta claims that,

"Neither the analysis nor the solutions are to be found in nationalist discourses. Hence, we see that the term 'birangona' (war heroine), which was declared by A.H.M Kamruzzaman, the home minister in the post-independence period with the intent to give dignity to the women who were

¹⁰⁵ Nilima Ibrahim, *Ami Birangona Bolchi* (Dhaka: Jagriti Prokashoni, 1998), 22-23.

¹⁰⁶ Meghna Guhathakurta, "Locating Sexual Violence and Impunity," in *Of the Nation Born: The Bangladesh Papers*, ed. Amena Mohsin and Hameeda Hossain (New Delhi: Zubaan Publishers, 2016), 97.

raped, was easily subverted by the ‘man in the street’ through a simple pun: ‘Era ki birangona na barangona?’ (Are they war heroines or prostitutes?). This was something that was related to me by Nilima Ibrahim, author of ‘Ami Birangona Bolchi’.”¹⁰⁷

The male rhetoric surrounding the rape of over thousands of Bengali women is irretrievably patriarchal and steeped in the language of war. The translation of sexual violence against these women into a military idiom of expected sacrifice attempted to make sense of the unthinkable offences and injuries and offer a recuperative future.

From the outset, women’s personal narratives that directly speak to their experience of war crimes have been excluded from official nationalist histories of Bangladesh. Nilima Ibrahim’s seminal work in this respect, attempts to integrate stories of gendered violence into the corpus of national history by removing the veil of silence surrounding their experience. The silence in the academic realm or among survivors themselves, however, did not imply invisibility in public memory and nationalist discourse. Dina M. Siddiqi in her essay entitled, “Gendered States: A Review of the Literature on Sexual Violence and Impunity” comments that “Until 1992 and the ‘gono adalat’ or people’s court convened by Jahanara Imam, the ‘birangona’ was largely a non-contested issue in public culture and politics.”¹⁰⁸

She explains the term ‘non-contested’ as being “neither entirely invisible nor absent in popular discourse”, the birangona is selectively remembered within certain fixed social parameters. Rather than invoking rape as a symbol of general savagery or dishonour, national war narratives increasingly presented rape as a political trope.

Whether figuring in wartime propaganda, newspapers or media reports, rape appeared in a consistent narrative pattern making the very personal sexual violation of rape publicly palatable by removing the private experience from its retelling. The ‘birangona’s’ existence was to be acknowledged, but along very specific registers and controlled patriarchal framing.

¹⁰⁷Meghna Guhathakurta, “Locating Sexual Violence and Impunity,” in *Of the Nation Born: The Bangladesh Papers*, ed. Amena Mohsin and Hameeda Hossain (New Delhi: Zubaan Publishers, 2016), 98.

¹⁰⁸Dina M. Siddiqi, “Gendered States: A Review of the Literature on Sexual Violence and Impunity,” in *Of the Nation Born: The Bangladesh Papers*, ed. Amena Mohsin and Hameeda Hossain (New Delhi: Zubaan Publishers, 2016), 145.

Ibrahim's work carves out that limited space within which women's portrayal of the crime and experience is discussed. Her interviews are directed towards expressing and resolving personal tensions rather than causing an outright politicization of rape. Rape narratives, as they appeared in public discourse, was also a means of affirming the extent of proper patriarchal protection. The 'birangona' is never divorced from the lines of social authority despite being a social pariah. The many stories that emphasized nondescript husbands' and fathers' inability to protect and avenge sexual attacks on their wives and daughters relied, in practise, on implicitly race and class specific patriarchal categories. By drawing out the testimony of the woman from the grip of a masculine cultural ideology, Ibrahim lays the ground for the development of a critical feminist scholarship in post-war Bangladesh.

Bina D'Costa in her essay, "Birangona: Bearing Witness in War and 'Peace'", further explains,

In December 1996, the Shommilito Nari Somaj SNS (a broad network of feminist activists in Bangladesh) organized four women's testimonies from Ibrahim's book to be read on Bangladesh Television (BTV). After the telecast, a few women contacted Ibrahim and the SNS to share their stories. There was a newspaper report on this, revealing that the SNS was approached by one of these women who bluntly said, 'I was raped by Pakistani army in 1971.' (Khan, 1997) When the SNS activists asked these women why they were coming forward after twenty six years of silence, one of them replied, 'Because now I am getting the courage to do so.' Several others gave similar explanations. One rape survivor stated, "I was raped and I would like to tell my son about it but do not know how to do so" ¹⁰⁹

Ibrahim successfully creates a gender sensitive space for 'birangonas' to speak about their experiences in a way that keeps them and their stories safe from further persecution and violence. In terms of the emerging feminist scholarship in Bangladesh, she has brought a critical self consciousness to bear both on the place and mode of enunciation (who speaks and how) and that of its reception (how it is interpreted and why). Ibrahim has been instrumental in framing gender,

¹⁰⁹ Bina D'Costa, "Birangona: Bearing Witness in War and 'Peace'," in *Of the Nation Born: The Bangladesh Papers*, ed. Amena Mohsin and Hameeda Hossain (New Delhi: Zubaan Publishers, 2016), 91.

class, sexuality and historical experience as specifying hitherto unmarked bodies, deeply compromising the fictions of unified subjects and disinterested knowledges.

The relation between experience and knowledge is viewed by Ibrahim not as one of correspondence but fraught with history, contingency and personal struggle. Her interviews explore not just the historical and cultural but also the psychic and imaginative boundaries which provide the ground for political definition and self definition of the ‘birangona’. Ibrahim’s efforts that have prompted and sustained her energy through hours of plodding through testimonies and interviews have been led by the conviction of the importance of the contemporary ideological and political legacy of debates about women and culture in post-war Bangladesh.

The condemnation of the ‘birangona’ as a woman without honour or repute is interpreted by Ibrahim as the response of a rootless, de-cultured urban bourgeoisie, unable, if not unwilling to comprehend their positionality. As a social activist and feminist critic, Ibrahim implicitly demands more stringent laws and greater state intervention in the rehabilitating these ‘birangonas’ but her work also highlights the appalling lack of will demonstrated by the state and the possibility that the state would merely abuse the greater powers that would accrue to it. In an interview with Sheikh Mujibur Rahman on the fate of the numerous war babies, Ibrahim notes his observation.

“No, apa. Please send away the children who do not have their father’s identity. They should be raised as human beings with honour. Besides, I do not want to keep that polluted blood in this country.”¹¹⁰

At the same time he also declared, “None of these bastard babies, who carry the blood of the Pakistanis, will be allowed to remain in Bangladesh.”¹¹¹ The discourse of the ‘birangona’ as victim has been invaluable to feminist studies on the Liberation War, in pointing to the systematic character of gender domination. Ibrahim brings out the notion of women’s oppression as a multifaceted and contradictory social process in the context of the 1971 Liberation War and the aftermath of it. Questions of agency lie at the heart of feminism. But in raising them in the

¹¹⁰ Nilima Ibrahim, *Ami Birangona Bolchi* (Dhaka: Jagriti Prokashoni, 1998), 18.

¹¹¹ Bina D’Costa, “Introduction: Turtles Can Fly: Vicarious Terror and the Child in South Asia,” in *Children and Violence: Politics of Conflict in South Asia* (New Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 26.

context of Bangladesh, one walks a tightrope. The issue of women's agency brings to light the dilemmas confronted in simultaneously attempting to speak within different historical moments and to discrepant audiences. Ibrahim's attempts at pushing the limits of women's agency in Bangladesh, is perhaps more situated or engaged as it takes into account the world in which it speaks. Through her research on the life of the 'birangona', Ibrahim thus presents the everyday life and history of women as one of critical importance in our understanding of the events of 1971 as it consistently re-emphasizes the signs of women's agency in struggle, resistance and coercion.

(3.4) Survivor Heroines and Testimony

Tara Neilson

The history of 1971 is complicated by the many histories imbricated into it. The right chronology, or the right history of events leading up to 1971, may be retrieved along with the roles of political actors over two decades in united Pakistan, and the struggle for cultural and political autonomy. The problem is how to investigate the earlier years leading to the cataclysmic event. The war of 1971 should appear in history as a logical outcome of the previous two decades, and not as a sudden episode. Bangladesh still does not have an exhaustive history of the Liberation War since the documentation and classification of records, the process of including new facts and figures continues till date. The need to write a political history which frees the liberation struggle from the inevitable militarist interpretation in the aftermath of 14 years of military rule in Bangladesh has been felt only recently. Historians have thus turned to oral and local accounts, autobiographies and memoirs in constructing 1971 and reading the politics of the nation as it unfolds in modern times.

Nilima Ibrahim's *Ami Birangona Bolchi* records the narratives of seven 'birangonas', whom Ibrahim had the privilege of personally interviewing. When word got out that a group of women in the cantonment had decided to leave the country with their Pakistani captors, Nilima Ibrahim,

professor of Bangla at Dhaka University, along with fellow Dhaka University professor Naushaba Sharafi and Sharifa Khatun from the Education Ministry, went to investigate; Ibrahim's and Sharafi's daughters served as drivers. The group made repeated forays into the cantonment and did manage to persuade some 50 or 60 women to come out; 30 or 40 women, however, refused to face what awaited them in Bangladesh. As one explained to Ibrahim, in a distant country, "whether I work as a prostitute or sweep roads, people will not recognize me, my husband or child will not ridicule me."

The first interview is with Mrs. T. Neilson, whom Ibrahim met in 1978 at Copenhagen, Denmark while attending a meeting of the International Alliance of Women.

She was about thirty years old. She was exquisitely beautiful and possessed a remarkably well toned body. She had curly, dark hair, which covered almost half her back. You don't see hair that long in this part of the world. Mostly you see short hair. Just by hair alone, Mrs. Neilson caught everyone's attention. She had a healthy olive skin tone like Latin Americans. I noticed that her eyes were dark like her hair. Her eyes were restless. Most likely her personality was a little restless too.¹¹²

The meeting with Mrs. Neilson was by accident as Ibrahim records. She had encountered Mrs. Neilson, whose husband was a noted journalist and a citizen of Denmark at an evening dinner organized by Ibrahim's friend, Allie. Their brief introduction had peaked Ibrahim's interest as she "felt drawn to her for some reason. Somewhere, something was dancing around in my head." Ibrahim recalls how Mrs. Neilson looked very familiar and she could not mask her eagerness to talk to the lady. Mrs. Neilson too seemed to reciprocate Ibrahim's interest because "As beautiful as she was, she was glancing back at me many times."

Their friendly exchange of words leads Ibrahim to naively ask whether Mrs. Neilson had visited Bangladesh with her husband, who had experience working there during the War. The 'playful nudge' with which Mrs. Neilson replies back to Ibrahim reveals much about the secrecy which surrounds the identity of the 'birangona'. "People say you're very knowledgeable. That you are a pundit, but very innocent like a child." The spoken and unspoken expressions that are not articulate allow the readers to suspect the background to Mrs. Neilson and the author's

¹¹² Nilima Ibrahim, *Ami Birangona Bolchi* (Dhaka: Jagriti Prokashoni, 2010), 13.

communication. It is much later that Ibrahim recalls why Mrs. Neilson's face had appeared so familiar to her on their first meeting at the party.

Ibrahim writes, "Suddenly, suddenly, a thousand watt bulb seemed to light up in my head! Oh God! I remembered the Women's Rehabilitation Center. I remembered a girl standing beside the entrance of the Operating Theater at the clinic of the Women's Rehabilitation Center in Dhanmondi, Dhaka: matted hair, pale, reddish lips, and wearing a plain white sari with red border. Standing with absolutely no fear or hesitation. Her name was Tara."¹¹³

The recollection allows Ibrahim to frame a point of reference. The dissonant voices and images come together and an intensely personal moment of remembrance emerges. Remembering needs occasions and it is often steered by emotions, needs, norms and aims. The complexity of this process indicates that sites of memory are triggered not always through focus on the subject (Mrs. Neilson in this instance) but through an act of braiding together the spoken and unspoken micro expressions in a communication. As Ibrahim reflects upon the past, she remembers the circumstances of meeting Tara at the Rehabilitation Center in Dhaka.

She recalls, "I had gone to this girl so many times to ask: where was she from, what happened to her, and got absolutely no response except yes or no. Whenever I asked her a question, she just came close and snuggled up to me- but didn't say anything. I understood she wanted my touch, whether that was a maternal touch, or the touch of her country, I didn't know."¹¹⁴

The revelation of identity leads to a reconstruction of the events surrounding the Rehabilitation programme that had first facilitated their meeting. Mrs. Neilson eventually breaks down and admits, "Nila apa, I recognized you from the first day. You also recognized me, didn't you? My name is Tara, Tara Banerjee, do you remember?"¹¹⁵

The psychologically induced constitution of the self occurs in the medium of the narrative. The autobiographical recollection and the conception of a new Self driven by aspirations and desires assume the form of a narrative. In terms of psychology, those who are able to tell new, altered

¹¹³, Nilima Ibrahim, *Ami Birangona Bolchi* (Dhaka: Jagriti Prokashoni, 2010), 13.

¹¹⁴Ibid., 15.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 15.

self stories have already developed new relationships towards themselves, others, and the world. Tara has refashioned herself as the elegant, poised, Mrs. Neilson, wife of a respectable Danish journalist. This transformation has allowed her to think of herself in a different way, to view and feel about herself differently. Her self-attitude seems greatly altered as she begins recounting her past. After a brief moment of emotional outpour, “Mrs. T. Neilson sat down neatly, drank a glass of water” and continued with her story.

The telling of her past and history almost seems to be emotionally satisfying as she has moved ahead in a social and temporal perspective. She appears as one who wants to direct a rational and realistic look forward and therefore glances backward once to present, explain, and organize the experiences of the past. Her rationally oriented, at least partially enlightened review of the past is dedicated more towards the linking of her present to the past than reliving or deciphering the dark traces of her past life.

However, no event, story or time can be objectively apprehended as simple facts and transmitted unemotionally. It is virtually impossible to erase a past identity despite the subject’s well intentioned aim to move forward or exercise a degree of self control and self discipline in narrating her story.

Mrs. Neilson too falters as she confesses to Ibrahim,

“When you were talking to all your friends by first name, and you would call me Mrs. Neilson, I was always embarrassed. But I could never tell you my first name was Tara. I shouldn’t hesitate, but it is in my culture to be modest. I have lost everything. My nation, my ethnicity, my religion, country, and I still haven’t been able to discard my cultural and religious influences completely.”¹¹⁶

Even in a post-conflict, non-violent setting, Tara reflects upon personal insecurities and cultural uncertainties that linger from past violence. The ‘memory culture’ which she is cognitively embedded in and which prevents her from discarding her ‘cultural and religious influences’ constitutes a formidable psychological dilemma which Tara can neither acknowledge nor solve. The puzzling characteristic of the cultural memory of trauma and violence emphasizes

¹¹⁶ Nilima Ibrahim, *Ami Birangona Bolchi* (Dhaka: Jagriti Prokashoni, 2010), 16.

the extreme difficulty of building new identities and rejecting old ones. Tara expresses a sense of embarrassment which is likely to have stemmed not only from a remembrance of the past but also through the constant awareness that her new title of 'Mrs. Neilson' constitutes an erasure of a past identity which cannot be divorced from its cultural associations with the 'birangona'.

Tara's account of her story begins with an introduction, where the subject through a process of cultural identification, places herself within a specific social or family structure. This form of 'communicative' or 'everyday' memory is based exclusively on informal communication that directs behaviour and experience in the interactive framework of a society known intimately to the listener.

In 1971, I was living in Rajshahi. My father worked as a doctor right outside the city in a small town. He was a government employee at one time. After the Language Movement, my father left his job and went back to the town where he was born, bought a sizeable amount of land, and built a small house for us. My mother's dreams were fulfilled because now she could have her own garden. By this time, Dadi had passed away. My elder sister, Kali got married and went to live with her husband in Calcutta, a neighbouring city in India. My brother was preparing to appear in his last examination at the medical college.¹¹⁷

Through this manner of communication, each individual composes a memory. Such communicative memory is marked by a limited temporal horizon and offers no 'fixed points' which would bind it to the objectivised record of history. These fixed points are fateful events of the past, whose memory is maintained through cultural formation (texts, rites, monuments) and institutional communication (recitation, practise, observance). In the flow of communication such fixities are often suspended or forgotten. Most of Tara's narrative is less concerned with the historical facts and events themselves than with the subsequent processes of remembering and forgetting, and of preserving or transforming aspects of the past.

The psychological internalization of armed conflict prevails in these narratives. Tara's difficulty, if not impossibility, of delving into a horrific past through her narrative mimics the very

¹¹⁷ Nilima Ibrahim, *Ami Birangona Bolchi* (Dhaka: Jagriti Prokashoni, 2010), 16.

symptoms of traumatic experience- noticeably repetition, self interrogation and temporal fragmentation. More significant than what is remembered of the past- be it personal or collective- is how it is revealed. The speaker recounts the past in flashes or moments which reveals that these traumatic memories often take the shape of condensed images.

“At night time, Baba did not sleep restfully. Any little sound would wake him up. He would walk up and down the balcony. Did he see any ominous sign? I don’t know. He never let us know...There was a curfew the next day, but I saw several men circling our house. My mother was praying to the Hindu gods to calm down her anxiety. Baba was pacing restlessly. We were holed up in our places like rats on March 26th.”¹¹⁸

The communication with the victim is also largely dependent on the degree of familiarity and willingness of the speaker. The subject conceives a sense of unity with the listener and therefore, the practise of oral history offers a more precise insight into their past and self image. These meticulous details perhaps have no chance of being articulated in public. Tara’s narrative proceeds from recounting a prolonged exposure to danger to remembering sudden flashes of terror. She is traumatized by a lengthy exposure to peril as well as by the acutely painful experience of rape. She is perhaps capable of fully narrativizing an incident of personal terror since the communication is held in privacy and with the knowledge that the listener would be able to understand the circumstances and symptoms of the sufferer.

Four or five men came inside the house and pulled me into the jeep. There was no sign of gunfire anywhere. The jeep sped off and I didn’t know whether they took my father or mother later, or killed them. The jeep sped forward with me to an unknown destination. For some time, I must have lost consciousness. When I woke up, I realized I was in the police station, and in front of me was an army officer. He talked with me politely. I said they brought me by force from my father and mother. He laughed and said, “That’s for your own safety.” I saw two or three other girls my age, crying sometimes screaming. They were scolded if they screamed. A few cups of tea arrived, and even some bread and

¹¹⁸ Nilima Ibrahim, *Ami Birangona Bolchi* (Dhaka: Jagriti Prokashoni, 2010), 16.

a few bananas. Nila apa, that scene is crystal clear to me as if it was happening right now.¹¹⁹

Notwithstanding, the narrative confusion in Tara's account, her testimony reveals a definite arc which stems from the particularity with which she recounts certain scenes and incidents which she claims are 'crystal clear' in her memory. Setting her memory in time is easy since the trauma has not entirely allowed the dissolution of the particular incidents leading to the crime however, what is indefinitely more difficult for Tara, is to verbalize the exact moment of rape and loss of honour.

It was a Bengali officer who tortured and abused me on my first day at the camp. I lost my voice from the shock and pain. Since I was already ill, my head was spinning and I could hardly fight back. I became prey to a monster whose eyes were filled with greed and lust. That night, so many people attacked my body. I cannot tell you exactly how many. I remember there were probably six to seven men...For many days, I couldn't think or function at all. My senses were dead. I ate mechanically, when instructed, in order to survive. I got passed around to innumerable men and endured rape and sodomy every day.¹²⁰

The location is not specifically mentioned by Tara. Yet, the scattered bits of information about a 'camp' with small rooms, having 'no mirror, glass windows or doors' can be used to piece together an image of what appears to be as an army barrack. Tara's experiences at the camp may be read as the symbolic focal point of her testimony and indeed the entire war from the perspective of ordinary Bengali women, who became 'birangonas'. By remembering the 'rape camp', she commemorates all those innocent young women like her, whose abuse shook the core of the nation, and caused them unending anguish even after the war.

The recent efforts at archiving the testimonies of the victims have produced a wealth of material in terms of published books and memoirs. Several government and non-government agencies have attempted to trace surviving victims and record their private experiences. The Ain o Salish Kendra in Bangladesh has periodically collected data and sponsored projects to record

¹¹⁹Nilima Ibrahim, *Ami Birangona Bolchi* (Dhaka: Jagriti Prokashoni, 2010), 16.

¹²⁰Ibid., 17.

the war time stories of women in order to initiate a public discourse on their plight as war widows, rape victims, mothers who lost their sons. These interventions have encouraged a more holistic sense of national history in Bangladesh unfolding an alternative view of the liberation struggle.

In 2001, Ain o Salish Kendra published the oral histories of 22 women who recollected their experiences of 1971. The book, *Rising from the Ashes: Women's Narratives of 1971*, is a continuation of the Narir Kotha project by the organization to help fill the gaps in record by providing first-hand accounts of events and experiences. A few of these accounts explicitly discuss rape and physical abuse. A reading of these accounts provides an opportunity to integrate these voices into the present scholarship and also reveal parallels of experience and intersections of memory. The testimony of Tara finds an uncanny resonance in one of the account narrated by Zulekha, which is retold by her interviewer, Suraiya Begum in the chapter entitled, "Life after 1971". The author mentions that Zulekha's story emerged through two separate interviews. In her first interview in 1997, Zulekha had not revealed that she had been abducted and raped by Pakistani soldiers causing glaring inconsistencies in the timeframe, but in her second interview in 2005, Zulekha disclosed the facts of her disappearance during the war.

One day the Pakistani soldiers caught me near the Patkelghata bridge and eight or nine other women like me. I was quite young then. They caught us and took us to their camp. We found many other women there. During our stay there, we were not allowed to wear any clothes. All of us were put in one room, and in the same room the Pakistani soldiers assaulted the women, one by one. Each of the women was raped by the soldiers, one after another, in turn. I was raped first by a soldier who though human in appearance was worse than an animal. He looked rough and barbaric. While assaulting me, he caused wounds all over my body. He bit my face so savagely with his teeth that it made two visible holes on my face. They took a long time to heal. I remember the names of three soldiers. They were Aziz Miah, Ibrahim Miah and Khalil Miah. I heard these names being used repeatedly when they would call each other... While one soldier committed

the monstrous deed, another would wait for his turn. That is how it kept happening to all the women.¹²¹

The hidden histories of Tara and Zulekha are a far cry from the conventional histories which are known and circulated. These alternative silent voices have gained greater visibility through the new historiography which researchers have attempted to build in the last 25 years. These projects have enabled the women in Bangladesh to be regarded not just as important agents of history but reliable reporters and interpreters. The oral history interviews which have been published in the last few years have further helped present researchers to read these texts against each other, as complementary to one another, and revealing common life histories which could be extended to include those women who have never spoken about their experiences but share similar trajectories. The ‘living’ quality of these fragments of memory enables an interactive process allowing the individual accounts to speak to one another.

Returning to Tara’s narrative in *Ami Birangona Bolchi*, the commonalities of experience are further suggested through an expansive description of particular forms of gender violence during 1971.

The women who were being routinely tortured were essential for these monsters to survive the war. We were the comfort women. So no matter how much they tortured us, they kept us alive in flesh and blood so they could use us. There were about eight to ten girls at this place where they kept me. Their ages ranged from thirteen to thirty years or even higher. They were all from the village. There was one educated girl from town.¹²²

Tara’s account reflects not just upon the dynamics between the victims and the perpetrators but also the sense of unity and companionship that developed between the women imprisoned at the rape camp. The physical pain of rape, and by extension that ominous collective experience of psychological trauma can only be exorcised if confronted and shared. Tara recalls how women often comforted each other, allowing them to mutually endure the ordeal by speaking about it rather than suppressing painful facts. This lies in sharp contrast to Tara’s experience of

¹²¹ *Rising from the Ashes*, ed. Shaheen Akhtar, Suraiya Begum et al, trans. Niaz Zaman (Dhaka: The University Press Limited, 2019), 122.

¹²² Nilima Ibrahim, *Ami Birangona Bolchi* (Dhaka: Jagriti Prokashoni, 2010), 17.

reconciling with her family after the War at the Rehabilitation facility. Her family's refusal to address the matter compounds the failure: to pretend a crisis never happened and hope that if we don't talk about it, it will disappear. This attitude merges with the self induced, post traumatic amnesia in Bangladesh in the years immediately following the Liberation War.

Tara recalls her encounter with 'one educated girl from town', with whom she got 'a chance to talk to a little bit.'

She was older than me, very beautiful. She was apparently a senior at Rajshahi University. Her two brothers were in the army. I'm sure that by this time they had joined the freedom fighters of Bangladesh. She put her hand on my head and said, "Please keep yourself alive in some way. We will be victorious." It was from her that I first heard this was July. I could not believe I had survived this hell for four months. God! For how many days will the war go on? These animals didn't look a bit discouraged or weak. That same evening, the university student was taken away from us, probably as a gift to another big Pakistani general.¹²³

It is the shared experience of rape and trauma that facilitates a means of understanding between the two girls and serves as a point of contact for building a sense of solidarity between the two victims. The idealized symbolic act of nurturance as she puts her hand on Tara's head seems to be reminiscent of the physical and symbolic reunion between mother and daughter. Beyond the verbally transmitted lore of female survival, the two girls exchange a knowledge that is subliminal and preverbal, a knowledge flowing between two alike bodies, almost akin to that between a mother and daughter, who has spent nine months inside the other.

Such kind of identification obscures the role of language as a medium of cultural communication. Being an educated girl from town, her empowering words of personal resistance to and deconstruction of the institutionalized muting of many of the victims not only exemplifies her psychological capacity to deal with the trauma but also allows Tara to derive strength from them.

¹²³Nilima Ibrahim, *Ami Birangona Bolchi* (Dhaka: Jagriti Prokashoni, 2010), 18.

However, language also exposes the abuse of the female body as a sexual commodity: violated, dominated, humiliated, and then abandoned as disposable goods once they couldn't be used any further. Tara recollects an incident where suddenly the next day, a girl died amongst them. Despite the lack of verbal communication between Tara and Moina, she constructs a permeable sense of union between the two.

She was pregnant. From the early morning, she was haemorrhaging profusely. She banged on her door and screamed a lot for help, but nobody came forward. Nobody understood what was going on completely. Her name was Moina. She was about fifteen. She threw about her arms and legs like a slaughtered animal for a while, and then slowly succumbed to the pain. Her face turned blue after she died. An elderly woman, Sufia's Ma came and wrapped her in a small blanket since the army officers never gave us sheets. That evening they came to take Moina's body away. There was an uncomfortable numbness that settled inside of me. It seemed that even these monsters were running out of their need for females. That means they could kill us. I was feeling a lot of discomfort in my chest.¹²⁴

The dialogue between Ibrahim and Mrs. Neilson, where Tara emerges as the protagonist of her own story overcomes a critical challenge. The challenge is not to reproduce the spectacle of violence or victimization and not to erase the materiality of violence and trauma by turning the corporeal body into a text. Since Tara claims agency and speaks on her own will, it eliminates the risk of commodification of her story of pain, trauma, violence and injustice. By dismantling the victim-expert split, abolishing the bifurcation between experience and analysis, and creating spaces for the survivor to theorize her own experience and talk back, Ibrahim facilitates the retelling of a realist narrative which captures a historical and psychological truth. There is no disciplinary, cultural framework imposed upon the narrative by the expert-listener and it is therefore successful in capturing the painful and personal violation of rape and its traumatic aftermath.

¹²⁴ Nilima Ibrahim, *Ami Birangona Bolchi* (Dhaka: Jagriti Prokashoni, 2010), 20.

Tara speaks about the Rehabilitation programme she became a part of post 1971 at Dhanmondi, Dhaka, which includes the experiences of many other such women caught in her circumstances. The 'realness' of survivor speech reflects the external social conditions that the 'birangona' had to face after being rescued.

When I was being treated at the Medical College, a steady crowd of curious men and women came to see me as a war affected woman, as a spectacle. We were on display. When I asked about these people, I found out they had come to see women like me. The nurse there explained everything to me in great detail. The new Prime Minister (Banga Bandhu) has announced that the women who have made the ultimate sacrifice for Bangladesh will be addressed as war heroines. (Birangona was the title given to us). I thanked and blessed the Prime Minister from my heart. I am a war heroine. I could not believe I had been given such high respect. I felt honoured.

In the mean time, my abortion was arranged. With a strong heart, I got prepared for this procedure. I finally understood my place in this society and in my family. Nila Apa, you have seen how all the girls simply resisted getting an abortion. Each girl wanted to keep her baby...But where will I go with this child? Do you remember Marjina? She used to wear a frock and was only fifteen years old. She was like me and had a son. She did not want the son to be taken away overseas. She used to scream every time she saw you, thinking you would take her son away. In the end, they did forcibly send her son away to another country for adoption. You didn't come around anymore after that, Nila Apa. Why, Nila Apa? Was it too hard for you to face Marjina?"¹²⁵

As Tara speaks, her narrative reveals the tangled layer of scars, which are both bodily and psychic, imprinted on her subjectivity, lingering on her flesh and in her hauntingly painful recollection. Quite simply and brutally, it is not only what was done to her but also what was done to others that form these scars. Tara's interrogation prompts the listener to confront her own discomfort and rage implicit in the process of witnessing this representation of violence and suffering. In a way, Tara opens up a space for empathetic identification as she directs her questions to Ibrahim urging her to remember the fifteen year old, Marjina. Ibrahim therefore

¹²⁵ Nilima Ibrahim, *Ami Birangona Bolchi* (Dhaka: Jagriti Prokashoni, 2010), 21-22.

assumes the role of a critical witness to trauma and oppression, entering into the victim's experience instead of performing the duties of a passive interlocutor.

However, identification is not a static process but rather an erratic one, it cannot be predicted, foretold, or planned. It is both necessary and difficult for the interlocutor since it may provoke understanding and tension. These tensions are caused not only by realizing the vulnerabilities of the victims but through questioning one's self-participation or non participation in the process. Identification demands sameness and necessitates similarity and at the heart of its anxieties, sits the question of 'otherness' and the idea of relationality of self to other or orientation towards others.

Tara's question, "You didn't come around anymore after that, Nila Apa. Why, Nila Apa? Was it too hard for you to face Marjina?" raises ethical issues of indifference, a façade of empathy, or sentimental gestures of pity. It questions the degree of involvement on the part of the social activist, engaged in the process of helping the victims. It also highlights the unpredictability of testimony, its volatility and possibilities. The interview is not simply a means of drawing out the most private, intimate stories of pain from the victim, but a radical space of possibility and critical inquiry for both the victim and the listener. The painful intimacy, contingent upon reliving and rearticulating pains and wounds, is relentlessly imbricated in the experience of not just narrating but also hearing the testimony.

Ibrahim recounts her inability to justify herself sufficiently.

"I lowered my head and said, "One of the toughest things in life was to send Marjina's son to Sweden. It was the most painful thing. I talked with the Prime Minister, Banga Bandhu, and he said, "Nila Apa, you must send away all those children who have no identity of their fathers. The child of a human being must grow up with the respect of a human being. Besides, I don't want that polluted blood in this country."'"¹²⁶

However, while there is a spontaneous exchange of stories between Ibrahim and Tara, Tara's remembrance of her father, who comes to visit her at the Rehabilitation Center constantly stresses the burden of choosing between speech and silence. It is this space of in-betweenness

¹²⁶ Nilima Ibrahim, *Ami Birangona Bolchi* (Dhaka: Jagriti Prokashoni, 2010), 22.

where the survivor vacillates, trying to negotiate a lived experience with the patriarchal family paradigm. Her father's arrival does not provide Tara as much comfort as she had expected. In fact, it drives in the realization that the trauma she has experienced can never be healed in the sense of a return to how things were before the catastrophe took place. The presence of her father refuses such closure and instead keeps the wounds of trauma and shame open.

Suddenly one day, Baba arrived. Baba looked like he had aged many years. He held me tight in a strong grip and burst into tears. I remembered that about seven or eight of us went to see Banga Bandhu in his executive office one day not too long before. The trip was arranged through the Rehabilitation Center. Our tears flowed on the chest of the Prime Minister that day. He said, "You are like my daughters. You have given the most precious thing for the liberation of this country. You are the highest heroines in my book. I am here, don't worry about anything." Banga Bandhu was behind us. But somehow I could not put my head and shed my tears as freely on my father's bosom. Baba's hand on my head did not relieve my anxiety.¹²⁷

Researchers and survivors alike have depicted rape trauma as an event that typically destroys the basic structures of the self. Ibrahim too voices the feeling of alienation, of being in a world devoid of meaning and vitality, which is a common experience she shares with Tara. The narrative is temporarily paused by Ibrahim's inability to continue with the process of listening. She is thrown into a state of extreme disorientation as she reports experiencing a certain paralysis of the mind before being overcome by intense feelings of hatred and anger. Ibrahim's emotions are no longer under her conscious control as a researcher and move beyond the scope of objective rationalizing to produce undesirable feelings of grief, anger and hatred.

"My lips were parched. I filled Tara's glass of water and started drinking out of mine. I didn't have to ask her to start again; she took a brief pause and started once more. I had a feeling of intense anger and hatred working inside of me. It's a hatred that kills humanity."¹²⁸

Tara recounts the horror, haunting memories, and lingering trauma of the war rape victim. Her psychological wounds function as evidence-archives of memory that establish her authority and

¹²⁷ Nilima Ibrahim, *Ami Birangona Bolchi* (Dhaka: Jagriti Prokashoni, 2010), 22.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 23-24.

ethos. The visual absence of her body reminds us of the vulnerability of the victim in speaking out. Her testimony stands alongside the thousands of women who could not speak out: those who were killed or could not give evidence publicly or kept silent out of fear of the social stigma that a rape victim carries in patriarchal cultures. Absence and presence are configured not only in terms of the belatedness of the trauma, but also in terms of the witness, whose rhetorical function is to give trauma a presence.

The Ain O Shalish Kendra arranged to recover some of these narratives which had gone missing. In 1992, three women: Masuda Khatun, Elijan Nessa and Duljan Nessa had gone to Dhaka to give their testimony at the Ghatak Dalal Nirmul Committee Gono Adalat organized by Jahanara Imam. There was an attack on the gathering and the schedule programme could not continue. Therefore, despite being present that day, these three women were unable to say anything. There are many more such testimonies which have been lost or forgotten in the course of time. Women who were accepted by their families and never officially recognized as ‘birangonas’, lived with the precarious knowledge of their condition without the opportunity of sharing their experiences with anybody. The struggles of rehabilitation and integration of the person within the fold of the family and the painful process of keeping silence are elaborated by Masuda Khatun in her narrative which is recorded by Suraiya Begum in *Rising from the Ashes*. Khatun, who lived in Hashimpur, Kushtia was raped by Pakistani soldiers in her home – a premeditated act – as her husband, Sheikh Mofizzudin was known to supply information to the local freedom fighters.

At the beginning, he was displeased with me and would rebuke me. He didn't want to take me back. He didn't want me to be his wife anymore. He refused to eat what I cooked. Afterwards, the elders of the village persuaded him that I had not been at fault. ‘Your wife has done nothing wrong,’ they said. ‘She did not do this thing willingly.’ After a lot of coaxing on their part, he accepted me once again. After he took me back, my husband did not insult or scold me further. He said whatever he had to immediately after the event. He did not refer to the incident again, but carried on as if nothing had happened. He didn't even refer to it when we were together. But I suffered afterwards. His silence was a constant reminder that I was the source of his dishonour. It affected our conjugal life. Intercourse was painful. Even now I have problems. During my periods, I bleed profusely.

I feel unwell and weak. From that day I have not been keeping well. My spirits are also low. I often think of what happened that day although I can't share my thoughts with anyone. I have not forgotten. I have nightmares. When I am lying in bed, I think I am about to die. I realize that my honour is gone.¹²⁹

In *Ami Birangona Bolchi*, Tara recollects the moment when she fully realized the crisis of her situation. As rape survivors were both markers of national shame and trauma, and honoured as war heroines, their position in the nation-state and post-war society in Bangladesh was highly contentious. Tara realizes the desperate need to help herself move beyond the grip of personal trauma and cultural shame by “standing on her own two feet.”

No, reality was very hard. I was a war heroine. I must stand on my own two feet. The female Polish doctor who freed me from the grip of my snakelike pregnancy, and under whom I had been working for six months, was my benefactor. I appealed to her for help. Could she help me in any way to go abroad? If I could not go outside of Bangladesh, I would die. This society would not accept me here. I explained to her how my family had acted towards me. She was speechless...I understood that whatever I had to do must be done through her. I had to do it fast because the international relief work team at the Women's Rehabilitation Center would not be here for more than four months. All the abortion patients had been helped. Now only the patients who were giving birth remained in the hospital.¹³⁰

Bina D'Costa in her essay, “Birangona: Bearing Witness in War and ‘Peace’”, further explains the plight of the rape survivors post 1971 in this context.

The initial responses of the women's families were not positive. In middle class families, the issue of rape was treated with secrecy and many families never revealed their daughters were ‘taken’ by the Pakistani army. A shroud of silence covered their stories. Some families took pregnant women to clinics for abortion. Those families that could not afford to exile their daughters to neighbouring India or one of the Western countries

¹²⁹ *Rising from the Ashes*, ed. Shaheen Akhtar, Suraiya Begum et al, trans. Niaz Zaman (Dhaka: The University Press Limited, 2019), 165.

¹³⁰ Nilima Ibrahim, *Ami Birangona Bolchi* (Dhaka: Jagriti Prokashoni, 2010), 23-24.

preferred abortions in order to quietly get rid of their family ‘shame’. If the women were in an advanced stage of pregnancy, they were left in rehabilitation centres or clinics to give birth, after which the babies were given up for adoption.¹³¹

To escape the risk of a social death, Tara decides to migrate from Bangladesh to a country where her identity as a ‘birangona’ would not levy on her the shame of being an outcast. Like Tara, many such rape victims managed to escape their country and find temporary or permanent refuge abroad, while an alarmingly large number remained trapped inside or were forced to accept the conditions of living within Bangladesh. The Bangladeshi state responded to the issue of rape and pregnancy in a way it perceived as legitimate: it exercised its authority over women’s bodies and their maternal roles through abortion and forced adoption programmes. But the women were ironically forgotten. She was rejected both bodily and socially in the aftermath of the genocide. The needs of women were insignificant in the nationalist construction of identity post 1971.

Tara recounts how one afternoon in the month of July she boarded an Aeroflot flight and left her home and country with the few things she called her own to travel onwards to Sofia, Bulgaria, where she would begin a new chapter of her life. Her application was approved and within a month she got permission to leave the country. They paid all her expenses. Because she was a one of the war affected women, she also received some additional benefits.

“In my soul I uttered, “Joy Bangla- Joy Banga Bandhu”. Banga Bandhu may I be able to maintain it with honour-the title of war heroine you have bestowed upon me. One day I will hold my head upright and walk into your chambers and give you a salaam.”¹³²

Tara’s account continues to provide a picture of her life in Bulgaria and her efforts to design a new identity for herself. Unlike other refugee women, who were often vulnerable, passive, helpless victims, Tara demonstrates surprising resilience and fortitude in the face of hardship.

¹³¹ Bina D’Costa, “Birangona: Bearing Witness in War and ‘Peace’,” in *Of the Nation Born: The Bangladesh Papers*, ed. Amena Mohsin and Hameeda Hossain (New Delhi: Zubaan Publishers, 2016), 84, <https://books.google.co.in/books?isbn=9385932071>

¹³² Nilima Ibrahim, *Ami Birangona Bolchi* (Dhaka: Jagriti Prokashoni, 2010), 24.

Her conversation with Ibrahim reveals her questioning nature: she questions the political appropriateness and fairness in dealing with war victims.

I also saw girls and boys from Bangladesh. A lot of them have come here because of their role in the 1971 war. As I got to know them more, I realized that they were sons and daughters of wealthy people, and they just took advantage of the war scholarships to come here to study. What was more disturbing was to actually see relatives of political leaders and their sons and daughters here. No one here was war affected like me, and I knew that those who were war affected in Bangladesh could not make their way here. All my gratitude goes to that Polish doctor. Nila Apa, have you all helped anyone like me to come abroad? With a bent head, I told her the truth, “No, no one like that came to us for assistance.” Why I remember you, Bashanti Di, Mrs. Mumtaz Begum, you were all part of the Board. Why didn’t you try to help us? “Tara”, I said, “They didn’t have the mental preparation to leave the country. Because they loved the land and the people, they wanted to stay there. They did not see the face of betrayal back then.”¹³³

Tara was able to take advantage of the available resources to build a life for herself in a foreign country but what troubles her is the dichotomy between the micro-level experiences of war affected women and the macro-level state policies that resulted in the perpetuation and legitimization of unequal class power relations, enabling privileged ‘sons and daughters’ of wealthy families to avail the rights due to those who had suffered the unaccounted impacts of militarization and genocide. Reflecting an awareness of oppressive regimes, whether under democratic or military dispensations, she challenges the efficacy of state rehabilitation policies that reinforce gender and class inequalities at the national and regional level.

She also comments on the paradoxical rationalization that led to the adoption of war babies in the light of the Liberation War of 1971. Although the adoption of war babies was designed as a method of removing the country’s ‘shame’ by crossing lines of race, ethnicity and nation, Tara idealizes it as a significant measure in reconfiguring the meaning and experience of kinship for those children who would have otherwise had to live with the social stigma of being unwanted products of a mass genocide. The adoption of war babies attempted to create kinship without

¹³³ Nilima Ibrahim, *Ami Birangona Bolchi* (Dhaka: Jagriti Prokashoni, 2010), 25.

blood in the face of an enduring equivalence between blood and belonging. Thousands of women were in fact reluctant to part with their children as Tara recalls the story of fifteen year old Marjina, who would scream at the threat of her son being taken overseas. However, violating the maternal instincts of women, some of whom desperately wanted to hold onto to their babies, the state policy of putting up these infants for international adoption is perceived by Tara as a means of bringing dignity and equality to the rape victims and their babies enabling them second chances at normal lives.

Tara recounts her visit to her friend, Dana's house in Copenhagen where she is introduced to the family.

Dana's father was a banker and the mother was a school teacher. The older brother was to appear in his school finals, and the younger one was in kindergarten. The elder brother was probably William, and the younger one, Sally. Dana's mother said, "My youngest son was actually born in your country. When we brought him back, he was only 17 days old. Isn't that right?" She looked at her husband for acknowledgement...The twenty days we spent was like a dream. It was as if I spent it with my own father, mother, brothers and sisters. One thing I noticed that most people have three to four children, and have adopted another child. And it was impossible to distinguish who was adopted, and who was biologically conceived. I was surprised to hear one woman singing the praise of her adopted son to Dana's mother.¹³⁴

Surveying the history of this campaign, Tara discusses its impact on serving the needs of children by enforcing governmental regulation on the private corners of social life- from family structure to religious identification and selfhood itself. The adoption movement that reached its height post December 1971 appeared as a form of social control of illegitimacy. The methods used to force surrender of infants were often coercive and unethical by today's standards. The relinquishing mothers' experiences of adoption were dramatically different from that of the adoptive parents who viewed it as an act of altruism. However, Tara quite naively ignores this aspect presuming that these children would never gain a sense of their genetic and ethnic history and that they would never form an emotional interest or tie to their birth relatives or homeland.

¹³⁴ Nilima Ibrahim, *Ami Birangona Bolchi* (Dhaka: Jagriti Prokashoni, 2010), 26.

“Apa, do you remember the nurses who went from here to Bangladesh and brought the children back here? Banga Bandhu’s decision to allow this was criticised so much at that time. He said that, “I don’t know who will have what religion, but I do know they will grow up with the basic dignity due to a human being.” You know that’s why Sally knows he’s Danish and has the same rights as a citizen who is born here.”¹³⁵

The conclusion of Tara’s testimony records her return to Bangladesh and her reunion with the family. Although she pronounces her new identity as Mrs. Neilson at the onset of her journey, “No, my past was dead. My present is Mrs. T Neilson.”, Tara is unable to relinquish her past identity completely, once confronted by the familiarity of her ‘house and neighbourhood’ and the touch of her mother’s hand on her head. Her suppression of uncomfortable memories, truths, and emotions and her desire to remain objective and aloof is expressed in her constant remembrance that she is no longer the helpless Tara, who had been abandoned at the Rehabilitation Centre by her own father. However, at the threshold of her home, the memories come back in a flood and Tara is unable to hold onto the measured poise and composure which she had been determined to carry as the ‘proud Mrs. Neilson’. The unspoken trauma which had overshadowed their relationship for so many years is expressed through tears and lamentation.

“It looked as though Baba had increased his attention towards the garden. The lilies and the orange blossoms were climbing up the trellis. I couldn’t bear to look anymore. My eyes were filled with tears. At the sound of the car, my mother came out. When I lowered my head for pranam, my Ma gave out a deep howl just like a childless mother.”¹³⁶

Here we get an insight into the conflicting aspects of Tara’s character: she suppresses her perceptive, sensitive and traumatized side beneath her pragmatic, rational self, through which she manages the past and negotiates her present relations with her family. She refuses to allow her personal trauma to be absorbed into familial or kinship ties. Perhaps Tara is unable to fully participate in these overwhelming emotional responses because she realizes that without visible markers, her pain remains to her family members as vaguely alarming, yet unreal. Tara’s mother is curious to know whether her husband, Neil and his family is aware of Tara’s status as a ‘birangona’. Tara realizes then, that for her mother, her trauma is reducible to a set of facts and

¹³⁵Nilima Ibrahim, *Ami Birangona Bolchi* (Dhaka: Jagriti Prokashoni, 2010), 26.

¹³⁶*Ibid.*, 31.

that the way in which her family defines the seriousness of the changes precipitated by rape is still greatly influenced by cultural views.

Ma took me upstairs. She said, “Look, why did you send Neil to the hotel? I have arranged this room for you. It has an adjoining bathroom.” Suddenly I remembered that Baba said he received government assistance. My jaw grew tense, but no, I had promised that I would never bring up my past again. That’s fine, if I had given so much of myself for the freedom of the country, then maybe my poor father deserved a bit of happiness...After sitting me down, Ma had so many things to say. She asked me if my husband knows all those things that happened to me. I said, don’t worry Ma. Your son-in-law, his Baba, Ma and relatives, everybody knows everything. They all love me very much and respect me.¹³⁷

Tara recognizes the impetus behind this unexpected change or transformation of her status and identity within her family. The representation of the silenced memory of Tara’s rape suggests that the silencing and suppression of traumatic memory takes place for complex reasons, some of which are sociologically and interpersonally imposed. In the case of Tara’s family, it is shame that causes them to physically and mentally disentangle themselves from Tara in the aftermath of the destructive, life changing event. The strategy of avoidance: attempts to prevent open communication or shunning the victim from their immediate social surrounding not only alienate Tara from her family but also create an awareness of her own devalued status as a ‘birangona’ within the social construct. Her association with the family name further intensifies the crisis, since the family seeks to end all possible identification with the dishonour surrounding the social and political status of the victim.

However, her reception as Mrs. Neilson, wife of a notable journalist, a citizen of Denmark focuses on how family background and racial ethnic identity affects their understanding of marital status. Although Tara lives at the crossroads or intersection of many social categories and identities, her status as a married woman lends her a sense of respectability and privilege, when she returns as a new entity, having assumed her husband’s name. Culturally, marriage is perceived as an institution providing numerous economic, legal and social benefits but perhaps

¹³⁷ Nilima Ibrahim, *Ami Birangona Bolchi* (Dhaka: Jagriti Prokashoni, 2010), 31.

for Tara's family it is the dissociation of family name which radically solves the crisis of self definition and identity, allowing them to embrace the victim as a daughter due to her changed marital status.

Tara is able to fully understand the complexity of her position much later when probed by Ibrahim's questions she is forced to reflect on her past and her inability to forget the circumstances of her departure from Bangladesh. Ibrahim puts forth a pertinent question regarding the experience of losing or eradicating the memory rather than preserving and maintaining the remembrance.

"Now that your life has been blessed with a husband, in-laws, love, affection, success, wealth and respect, you have nothing more to want. You can forget about everything and think of yourself as a completely happy woman. Why are you still restless, Tara?"¹³⁸

Tara's reflections on the fragmentation and distortion of identity in the aftermath of the war as a 'birangona' reveal the importance of unfolding and deciphering the confused memories and emotions rather than burying them in the corners of her newly fashioned life as Mrs. T. Neilson. For Tara, the memories of the event are integrated into a personal awareness. They are kept alive in her consciousness. She replies quite plainly to Ibrahim's query:

Apa, today our country is free. Some people have made it and others have perished. Some have become the highest of war heroes, some ministers and others ambassadors with much power and reputation. And me? I never wanted anything. I just wanted respect for my womanhood and shelter in the bosom of my country. But I have no identity in my own country. Tara Banerjee has died, but Mrs. T. Neilson has gotten all the respect and dignity in my own country. Where am I to my own countrymen? I am hated, criticized, despised, and dead.¹³⁹

Through her words, the speaker lays open the spatial, social and political dimensions to the relationship between the estranged Tara Banerjee and the present Mrs. T. Neilson. She views the past or her war story as incomplete and indeterminate, hence the past will always survive in the

¹³⁸ Nilima Ibrahim, *Ami Birangona Bolchi* (Dhaka: Jagriti Prokashoni, 2010), 33.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 34.

present. It remains like a raw wound in her memory. Her present identity will also intervene in the past and resurrect it by remembering the events that led to the change and preventing it from being lost or forgotten. Tara reflects on the Danish culture and city of Copenhagen, which she now calls her home. It is a city immersed in beauty, culture and the warmth of its people, yet it can also be an alienating place because her identity as a Danish citizen marks the ultimate demise of her identity as a Bengali. Perhaps it subtly invites a feeling of anxiety and solitude as a remnant of the war years which disrupted her ties with her 'own country' and her 'own countrymen'.

And the soil of my country- I have lost that too. Today I am a citizen of Denmark. Nobody will say that I am Bengali. It took me two years to even tell you who I really was. Can you tell me why I suffer from such hesitation and embarrassment? Can you tell me where I have made a mistake? The fathers and brothers who could not protect me from the hands of the rapists are the one's passing judgement on me and telling me what constitutes an untouchable or an unacceptable lifestyle. I hate thinking about the beauty of the Danish social system. The person who accepted me with much affection was a foreigner.¹⁴⁰

Tara's interview at times almost seems to be spoken in the shifting idioms of the multiple voices emerging from the same person. Her testimony reveals the frailty of a new identity which cannot permanently relinquish the past and struggles to coalesce into a single, recognizable whole. The fragmentary excavations of the past are constrained by the impact of trauma and a strong emphasis on declaring her new identity as Mrs. T. Neilson. She proclaims that, "I have told Neil that after I die, please do not take my remains to Bangladesh. You can physically give birth to a child, but unless you raise the child with love and nurture her, you do not become a mother."¹⁴¹ The psychological separation from her past identity is thus, rooted in a profound ideological change that leads Tara to choose life in exile over death in homeland. She is intensely aware that to her countrymen she is 'hated, criticized, despised and dead'. Her identity change empowers her with a deliberate decision to review the past in terms of the social and political dimensions rather than on its individual psychological grounds.

¹⁴⁰Nilima Ibrahim, *Ami Birangona Bolchi* (Dhaka: Jagriti Prokashoni, 2010), 34.

¹⁴¹Ibid., 35.

Although she has emerged as a new woman, Tara admits that if she returned to her homeland she would be a neglected and shamed. She realizes that the rupture between the past and her present cannot offer a solution, but neither can the opposite movement of recapturing an earlier exilic identity. With maturity, she learns to accept that whether this identity change stems from a conscious or unconscious response to personal trauma of war, neither route offers the comfort of resolution or the promise of redemption.

‘Ami Meherjaan Bolchi’

Ibrahim’s interview with Meherjaan is far more direct yet psychologically complex than the first with Mrs. T. Neilson. Time and again testimonies of girls and women who have been raped in most brutal ways are recoded. Yet, the exact meaning conceived through the labelling of rape as a weapon of war is rarely if ever spelled out. The testimony of Meherjaan provides an insight into the victim’s personal perspective on sexual violence as a weapon of war and contextualizes it within the ‘birangona’ discourse in Bangladesh.

Mass rape during armed conflict first gained attention during the war in Yugoslavia (1991-1999) and followed distinct patterns and served strategic purposes. Todd A. Salzman claims that the “Serbian army followed a written plan, which singularly pronounced the use of rape to ethnically cleanse Bosnia-Herzegovina.”¹⁴² The same was practised in Bangladesh. In the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) jurisprudence pioneered the approach that used acts of rape and other forms of sexual violence to include elements of other international crimes such as torture, enslavement, and persecution, which previously had not been litigated in the context of gender violence. Then, why had the International Crimes Tribunal (Bangladesh) of 2009 set up to investigate and prosecute suspects for the genocide committed in 1971 by the Pakistan army and their local collaborators, paid such little attention to the question of mass rape despite it being widely acknowledged and spoken about by many?

¹⁴² Todd Salzman, “Rape Camps as a Means of Ethnic Cleansing: Religious, Cultural and Ethical Responses to Rape Victims in Former Yugoslavia,” *Human Rights Quarterly*, 20, no. 2, (May 1998): 348.

In the context of Bangladesh, rape might be seen as one form of violence that allows for plausible deniability. Crucial to maintaining silence was and is the active collusion of States in providing impunity to perpetrators, sometimes under the guise of protective laws and special powers to the armed forces, at others under the guise of nationalism. Undoubtedly, accountability has been a fraught issue across Bangladesh, especially when it involved the war crimes of 1971.

Meherjaan's testimony complicates the current understanding of wartime sexual violence by defining the identity of her perpetrator and the motivations behind his actions instead of preserving a solemn silence. It also becomes especially important at a time when war violence is at the core of so many legal policies and activist agendas because it seeks to defend the legitimacy of her struggle and eventual decision to leave Bangladesh with her alleged perpetrator. Her testimony reveals a qualitative difference in the experiences of the 'birangona' despite the shared limitations and challenges. Meherjaan's account essentially frames itself in opposition to the mainstream narrative of the 'birangona', which attempts to refocus attention towards their rehabilitation within the social fabric. She reasserts the issues of agency and interest in her decision to abandon her family and move to Pakistan with her perpetrator.

It is my firm and unflinching belief that I am a 'birangona'. My nation has bestowed this title on me. My parents tried to embrace me with open arms, but the fear of social stigma prevented me from returning to them. I might not be a 'birangona' in your view, but undoubtedly I am not a 'barangona'. I have realized that above all I am a woman. I have seen the lustful gaze of my perpetrators and suffered their barbarity. The suffering and violence which I have endured for the past eight months has made me intimately feel and realize that I am a woman. I have the capacity to give birth and nurture a new life. A woman can carry a child in her womb for ten months and raise it as her own. In this respect, I am also a mother. I might not have received the status of a married woman, or the happiness of domestic life but I have still held on to my respect.¹⁴³

It is difficult to understand the full pattern of variation in her testimony, especially in the context of the dominant discourse on the 'birangona'. Meherjaan marks a departure from the acknowledged manner in which the 'birangona' framed, perceived and explained her experiences

¹⁴³ Nilima Ibrahim, *Ami Birangona Bolchi* (Dhaka: Jagriti Publication, 2010), 54.

towards her perpetrators. It further reveals an absence of a synchronized, cohesive pattern of response within the collective group because it is impossible to align the interests of the 'birangona' with one another due to the difference in mandates, influence and effect on the individual. By naming her perpetrator (whom she views in the capacity of being her saviour) Meherjaan opens up a debate on the degree of intentionality and involvement.

Layek Khan emerges through the narrative as a relevant actor in the survivor's discourse. However, he lies outside the boundaries of investigation primarily due to his passive function in the mechanism of war rape and violence inflicted on the women at the camp. Conflict related sexual violence in Bangladesh is presumed to adhere to absolute standards with acts of horrific sexual violence being ascribed to a majority of the Pakistani militant forces using rape as a strategic weapon for ethnic cleansing and cultural subjugation. Comparative standards matter in this respect in order to determine any deviations from the norm. A study of different variables- such as, for example degrees of involvement, as opposed to general incidence and prevalence- may yield different perspectives.

Meherjaan's relationship with Layek Khan raises questions about the threshold of conflict and the participating actors who were not directly involved in the conflict-related sexual violence used as a weapon of war. Layek Khan is sympathetic and even loving towards Meherjaan. Although his attitude does not set any parameters for the analysis of gender violence during the war, it is interesting to note that perhaps such humanitarian responses towards the victim, if any, prompted a more meaningful remembrance of the experience than is expected of the victim of rape and indiscriminate violence.

Meherjaan relates her relationship with Layek Khan through terms of endearment and a certain fondness.

At this camp I met an elderly 'hawildar'. He was nearly sixty years old. Although he was a Pathan by descent, his heart was full of love and kindness for me. I didn't know why he always treated me well. When I fell ill, he expressed his concern and sadness. But for the past three days, he seemed very sombre and worried. I asked him, "Khan Sahib what happened?" He replied, "Darling, the war has ended." Elated by the news I said, "Then you will return to your country? Are you not feeling happy? But where will you leave

me?” Layek Khan nodded his head sadly and said, “No begum. I will not return. My grave will be in your country. We have lost. In a few days we will either be killed or taken captive. If we fall in the hands of the Mukti Bahini, there will be no hope of survival.” Although I was overjoyed, I hadn’t lost my senses. I told him, “Khan Sahib, marry me. I will save you from the Mukti Bahini.”¹⁴⁴

The foundation of Meherjaan’s decision to marry Layek Khan is prompted not simply by the fear of social stigma that she would have to face if she chose to return to her own people. Her choice transcends concerns regarding the self and reflects a feeling of mutual sympathy between the persecutor and the persecuted. It is reasonable to assume from Meherjaan’s testimony that her choice depended largely on an instinct to protect the man who had shown her a trace of love and sympathy during that grim period of eight months spent at the rape camp. She assumes the role of a protector, eliminating the risk of captivity or death perhaps as repayment for the sense of security which Layek Khan had offered her during her imprisonment at the camp. The fear and shame operative within the victim towards their persecutor is not explicitly expressed through Meherjaan’s account of her relationship with Layek Khan. Therefore, the difficulty of generating an accurate impression of the nature of their relationship arises through the lack of any definitive evidence.

In this regard, it is important to take into account the remaining dynamics of vulnerability that affect both gender relations and violence in post-conflict settings. The end of a conflict is a complex milestone that cannot be easily determined. If the end of a conflict, for instance, is marked by the time a ceasefire goes into effect and not by the demobilization of armed groups, it is possible that war crimes and violence may shift from combatant-civilian violence to combatant-combatant. Layek Khan admits that if he falls in the hands of the Mukti Bahini, his life will not be spared. The victim, Meherjaan on the other hand correlates to the problem of her persecutor and realizes the need to extend her protection to the Pakistani soldier.

Meherjaan fails to recognize Layek Khan as a perpetrator of violence. On the contrary, he becomes her saviour for instance when Meherjaan rationalizes the reasons for marrying him.

¹⁴⁴ Nilima Ibrahim, *Ami Birangona Bolchi* (Dhaka: Jagriti Publication, 2010), 54.

I was stubborn that he had to marry me. The reason I felt stemmed from the uncertainty of who I would be given up to after the war. I knew that my society would refuse to accept me because the day I was forcefully brought away, nobody came forward to save me. Even today no one will hold me by the hand and take me. But will my father, brother not come back for me? Suddenly I realized that tears had started rolling down my cheeks and it was Layek Khan who was holding me in a paternal embrace wiping off my tears. He pulled me close and said, “It’s okay. Now the war is over. I will talk to the ‘maulavi’ at the camp and see if he agrees. No one else will know about it, just you, me and ‘maulavi’ sahib.”¹⁴⁵

In a way, Meherjaan’s perception of Layek Khan underscores the complexities of understanding and accurately surveying individuals’ participation in wartime acts of sexual violence. The discussion of strategic sexual violence requires a critical overview of military designs which provide tacit approval of rape as a means of challenging and subjugating the dominant masculinity of an ethnic community or race by exploiting vulnerable target groups such as women and children. ‘Strategic’ does not refer only to a top-bottom hierarchy of explicit orders, but also to a command system that makes such conduct permissible or, at an individual level, to decisions to perpetrate sexual violence because of reasons tied to ethnic, racial, religious, or other identities. The fundamental tension in Meherjaan’s narrative lies in her portrayal of Layek Khan as a benign, considerate man who does not voluntarily offer participation in the system of war rape practised at the Pakistani camps. In the context of the forced sexual violence and intimidation of women during the Liberation War, there is a certain amount of justifiable interest in exploring Layek Khan’s motives towards Meherjaan. The Pakistani leadership exercised rigid control over the sexuality of Bengali women and girls, most of who were kept as comfort women, a term that does not recognize the conjugality in place, nor their treatment as willing sexual partners.

Layek Khan’s portrayal thus becomes problematic owing to the dominant perceptions and analyses of perpetrators as barbaric, almost bestial in the recorded testimonies of other ‘birangonas’. But moving beyond the bias, Meherjaan’s touching description of the Pakistani

¹⁴⁵ Nilima Ibrahim, *Ami Birangona Bolchi* (Dhaka: Jagriti Publication, 2010), 55.

soldier presents a normative change by acknowledging the possibility of humanitarianism in the face of strategic violence. The relationship between Meherjaan and Layek Khan evades any form of concrete categorization due to the lack of nuances that define a conjugal relationship and the presence of an overtly paternal attachment that develops between him and the young girl.

A little before evening, ‘maulavi’ sahib arranged our ‘nikaah’ (marriage). He said, “It is a good thing for you. Khan sahib is a kind man, he will not leave you.” The next day, there was complete chaos at the camp, the sound of guns could be heard everywhere. People were running here and there but the soldiers stood in their positions. I stood clinging to my husband’s waist. But I was amazed that the man did not push me away. Suddenly there was an announcement on the loud speaker and all the soldiers dropped their weapons. Some of the men were from the Mukti Bahini while others appeared foreign as they spoke in Hindi. They informed us that all the women were free. From their experience, they had carried some sarees with them. All the women wore them and ran in different directions. I wore my saree too but did not leave Layek Khan’s hand.¹⁴⁶

Layek Khan effectively challenges the notion of volition and consent to wartime sexual encounters by unfolding a different image of the persecutor. It is not unusual that across different war contexts and even within the very same context, the same actor may employ multiple forms of sexual violence with different motivations. Various factors influence the use or non-use of sexual violence during national conflicts. Whether Layek Khan is entirely innocent of the crime of rape and sexual violence in the context of the war cannot be ascertained since the only available testimony is that of Meherjaan. However, it becomes evident through her account that he was certainly not guilty of the crime of male opportunism which is noted as one of the chief factors contributing to sexual violence during war. Although Layek Khan is an implicated actor in an organizational strategy of power and gender domination, he does not adhere to the general pattern of behaviour as structured by a set of normative cultural beliefs and military objectives that sanctioned sexual violence as part of a greater political project.

A symbiotic relationship develops between Meherjaan and Layek Khan which defies the nationally specific stereotypes, myths, and scripts of rape and its relation to differences of culture

¹⁴⁶ Nilima Ibrahim, *Ami Birangona Bolchi* (Dhaka: Jagriti Publication, 2010), 55.

and community. The figure of Layek Khan requires a broader range of understanding of sexual relations between the victims and the persecutors. Neither Meherjaan nor Layek Khan ascribe to the standard rape identities popularized by accounts and testimonies of survivors i.e. of the vulnerable female victim and the lustful male perpetrator. Layek Khan does not regard Meherjaan in the light of sexually vulnerable object, who is already raped or already rapable. In doing so, he prompts a need to focus attention on analyzing events of violence, and their construction, in a range of specific, rather than universalised context.

While the other women at the camp flee the site of conflict, Meherjaan chooses to stand by Layek Khan facing the consequences due to a prisoner of war rather than embracing her freedom. She identifies him as ‘my husband’.

Someone told me, “You don’t have to be afraid. If you wish, we will take you back home.” My husband looked at me sorrowfully. I replied, “I do not have a home. This is my husband. We have married following all religious rites. Wherever you take him, I will go with him. The soldier laughed, along with the Pakistani ‘jawans’ I was also taken as a prisoner of war and asked to board a truck.¹⁴⁷

This deviance in the dynamics of victimization and gender role impacts not just the course of Meherjaan’s life narrative but also reflects on her cultural representation as a ‘birangona’. In this respect she opens herself up to multiple interpretations. Her decision challenges the cultural assumptions associated with the ‘birangona’ by constructing the victim as a collaborator. Initially the victim’s innocence is assumed yet by virtue of her decision to stay with her persecutor, her status as a ‘birangona’ is repeatedly scrutinized, challenged and called into question. Although Meherjaan’s narrative exposes the desires and fears lurking behind her choice of living with her persecutor, it also exacerbates the difficulties of being accepted as a ‘birangona’ or war heroine. She admits the dangers of distortion when she claims, “I might not be a ‘birangona’ in your view, but I am certainly not a ‘barangona’.”

Overcoming the problem of social categorization and cultural recognition as a ‘birangona’, Meherjaan reveals a complex psychological orientation and identification towards Layek Khan.

¹⁴⁷ Nilima Ibrahim, *Ami Birangona Bolchi* (Dhaka: Jagriti Publication, 2010), 56.

Our destination was the military facility at Dhaka. Along the way, several other trucks and jeeps joined us. We reached the barracks at Dhaka. Their officers were assigned beautiful houses while we were kept at the barracks. But 'hawildar' was given a separate room because of his wife. I was finally safe. I wondered how all this had happened. Layek Khan offered 'namaz' (prayers) more fervently than before since he too had never imagined that his life would be spared. He kept telling me that he was safe because of my fortune and that since he was alive he would surely go back to Pakistan one day to meet him wife and children. His words shook the core of my being. "Where would he leave me?" But he assured me by saying that he was a true Muslim and he would never abandon me. This was not the time for debate as I was in imminent danger. If not, I wanted to remind him that till now they had forcefully held and left many like me. But my mouth had gone dry and I could barely speak.¹⁴⁸

The dichotomy in Meherjaan's response to Layek Khan as evident in her deliberate silence introduces the issue of criminal responsibility in the context of sexual violence during an armed conflict. It might seem rather tenuous to anchor the responsibility of a crime committed by others on one who was not an active participant. But quite naturally, knowledge of the crime, in these circumstances, is an active notion which leads to the ability to assist others to perform such deeds depending upon the dynamics of the situation at hand. Hence, the assumption that Layek Khan did not perhaps directly instigate or perform rape becomes immaterial to his criminal responsibility. Meherjaan reveals an awareness of what is understood as a common design to pursue one course of conduct with the same criminal intention. Layek Khan may or may not have physically executed any of the crimes, but he actively contributed in enforcing the common purpose of using sexual violence as a tool of warfare.

In this respect, Meherjaan perhaps subconsciously identifies him as a co-perpetrator sharing equal moral fault rather than being wholly innocent by virtue of non-participation in acts of rape and sexual violence.

Marking a departure from the testimony of Mrs. T. Neilson who was abandoned by her family after the ordeal she had suffered, Meherjaan is warmly received by her father who does not

¹⁴⁸ Nilima Ibrahim, *Ami Birangona Bolchi* (Dhaka: Jagriti Publication, 2010), 57.

perceive the event as a sharp, decisive change in the established patterns of their family life. He willing to take his daughter home despite the fear, anxiety, and social stigma.

For a few seconds father and I remained silent. Then I rushed into his arms like I did as a child. Neither of us could hold back our tears...Father said, “Ma, come home with me.” But I couldn’t bring myself to agree with him. For a moment, I felt like running back home where Lalu, Milu, my elder brother were eagerly waiting for me. But I couldn’t allow my father to suffer anymore. I told him, “Baba, please return home. Let me talk to them and see what arrangement they have made for us.” But my father was not convinced. He forced me to return home with him. He said, “I don’t need anybody’s help. You are my daughter and you will stay with me like you have for so many years.” After a long struggle, I finally sent father back home that day. It was not just the Pakistanis who were our enemies but I understood the nature of our own people at that time. Those who wanted to give us refuge, what would be their position in society? We are dead for our people and they are suffering too. What is the point of causing them any more pain?¹⁴⁹

Despite the acute experience of trauma, Meherjaan clearly views her rape as a complex socio-political issue with severe psychological connotations for the victim as well as her family. By situating rape as a part of the larger political agenda, Meherjaan recognizes the enormity of the crisis but does not fail to understand the micro-elements related to the issue. The issue of rape cannot be diverted into a political tangle of genocide and nationalism where the individual sufferer and the suffering of those related to her are somehow lost. The system designed to make the victim feel that she is maimed and mutilated encompasses the family as well and it is perhaps this realization which prevented many from returning to their family.

Meherjaan testifies to this by staunchly defending her decision to migrate to Pakistan. She claims that the socio-political violence in Bangladesh cannot deny the personal and political agenda of the aggressors, at the same time it cannot overlook the scars caused by civil society in the physical and mental existence of the survivor. Essentially, Meherjaan’s testimony serves to highlight the impossibility of reconstituting social attitude towards the survivor in the aftermath of the war. The treatment of the rape victim involves elements of collective dynamics which are

¹⁴⁹Nilima Ibrahim, *Ami Birangona Bolchi* (Dhaka: Jagriti Prokashoni, 2010), 57.

comparatively easier to identify but difficult to redress since it often engages the tacit support of the community.

One day three Apas from Dhaka University came to visit us. After interviewing us minutely, they asked, “Why do you want to go to Pakistan? The country will take your responsibility. Haven’t you heard that the Prime Minister has given you the title of ‘birangona’? Nira Apa was the most senior amongst us, she was also highly educated being a final year student at Rajshahi University. She debated and argued with the three Apas extensively regarding this subject. Meanwhile I learnt the names of the three Apas: Nausaba, Sharifa and Nilima. They had come to take us back. Incidentally even father arrived that day to take me home. Amongst us most of the women were married. Their husbands had come to speak with them. Some of them had brought sarees but without any remorse they informed their wives that they could not take them back. They had to think about their society and those who lived with them. They could not afford to let a fallen woman live within their family. Although they personally wanted to take their wives back, there was no means of doing so. We understood our position from their remarks. When our own husbands could not take us back, how could we expect a Prince Charming to come and rescue us? Hence we remained firm in our decision.¹⁵⁰

Despite being the youngest among the group of women, Meherjaan does not deviate from her decision to migrate to Pakistan. She chooses to live in marriage with the aged, Pathan soldier and fearlessly travels from India to Rawalpindi, Pakistan. In the view of her contemporary Bengali society, this is a detestable outcome but Meherjaan learns to lower her expectations of male conduct and to put up with the shame and shabbiness of marrying her persecutor. Although society complicates and muddies Meherjaan’s decision to marry Layek Khan, it does not pause to rethink the psychological and physical space occupied by the victim. Her decision to marry the Pakistani soldier is interpreted as a tacit consent to the act of violation committed by them. The crime of rape is made insignificant and the victim termed ‘barangona’ because the definition of rape is warped by the notion that consent was very often involved in the acts of sexual outrage that were reported by women. In this respect, her forced pregnancy is also viewed as evidence of her own desire.

¹⁵⁰ Nilima Ibrahim, *Ami Birangona Bolchi* (Dhaka: Jagriti Publication, 2010), 59.

The notion of a 'Prince Charming' rescuing the vulnerable woman is rejected by Meherjaan since it clearly relies on the collusion of a society all too at ease with violence towards women and readily willing to deny any responsibility of their future. Rather society assumes a keen interest in analyzing the sexual politics between the victim and aggressor, since Meherjaan's marriage to Layek Khan appears to project an extreme form of resignation to male sexual brutality. Meherjaan's decision to live with her persecutor is further interpreted as the Bengali woman being unable to resist the putative erotic charge of the ethnic 'Other'.

However, Meherjaan's narrative of her experience in Pakistan debunks the prevailing conception and brings forth the discovery of new opportunities and a new purpose in her 'after life'. In a sense, she proclaims the beginning of a fresh start by dissociating herself from the events of the past. Although the psychological dissociation and openness towards a new culture is seemingly incomprehensible, the transpersonal space shared with the new people in her life allows Meherjaan to trust their goodwill and view the 'Other' as a part of her own. Perhaps, it is this openness of forgiveness which is replicated in the ease and unobtrusiveness of her interpersonal relationships. It is only once she is back within a family structure, with its far longer history of protectiveness towards women that she lets down her defences in accepting Layek Khan. Undoing the repression of the subconscious which unequivocally held Layek Khan and his countrymen responsible for the present circumstances of her life, Meherjaan leads the way towards a psychical emancipation.

Finally, we reached Pakistan from India. Layek Khan had a month long holiday after which he would be informed of his next posting. Meanwhile, I realized that I was expecting. Even Layek Khan understood. He assured me by saying that his first wife would never step out of the village so he could keep me with him where he worked. All these days I had only myself to worry about but now the thought of my child made me restless. We stayed at Rawalpindi and put up with a friend of Layek Khan. They were very good people. They welcomed me into their house and kept me with all due dignity and comfort. They never questioned me or doubted me. Neither was there any sense of resentment towards me. Layek Khan left me with them for fifteen days and went to visit his wife and children in the village. I was concerned about his return. But Lal Khan's wife assured me by saying that Layek Khan was a very kind and thoughtful man. I didn't

find any reason to doubt her. Besides, Pathans are known to keep their word. I didn't understand their language because although I knew basics of Urdu, I had no knowledge of Pashtu. But I managed to communicate with Lal Khan's wife by means of signs and hints and soon we became good friends.¹⁵¹

Meherjaan eventually gives birth to a son which increases her accommodation with her new environment. The child is not perceived as a mark of her disgrace in society and is saved from a life of shame and disillusionment that might have been its fate in Bangladesh. In fact, her lack of knowledge of the child's father becomes a reflection of her good and innocent character, rather than a resistance to patriarchal structures. Layek Khan assumes the role and duties of a father without question recognizing the generic human person to whom his protection is due. However, despite the apparent settlement in her life, the substance of a marriage, as the life together of two concrete thinking beings, bound together by love is entirely unavailable to Meherjaan. Ironically, Meherjaan does not view her marriage as a compromise. On the contrary, she accepts it as her fate and more importantly as the rightful fate of her newborn child.

In the aftermath of the Liberation War of Bangladesh, the War Crimes Tribunal debated genocidal rape and forced impregnation as 'crimes' against women. But the war rape orphans were tragically dropped out of sight. Indicating a public sensitivity to their fate and an awareness of their existence, Western families mobilized to retrieve the stigmatized children from the war zone. This is evident in the testimony of Mrs. T Neilson who reports many Swedish families having one or two adopted children from Bangladesh. But these adoptions went largely undocumented failing to connect the fate of the rape victims and the fate of their children in legal discourse. The war babies were primarily identified with the perpetrators rather than the victims of genocide since they were forcibly or intentionally conceived in a context that naturally precluded them from acceptance within the family and the community.

Placing the identity of these children therefore became a unique challenge because it complicated several national concerns following the war particularly with respect to the reconstruction of civil society. Although forced impregnation was seen as an intentional policy on the part of the Pakistani army and a by-product of mass rape, Rhonda Copelon in her analysis

¹⁵¹ Nilima Ibrahim, *Ami Birangona Bolchi* (Dhaka: Jagriti Publication, 2010), 60.

of the genocide in Bosnia-Herzegovina, states that “the fact of pregnancy, whether aborted or not, continues the initial torture in the most intimate and invasive form; and bearing the child of rape, whether placed for adoption or not, has a potentially lifelong impact on the woman and her place in the community.” Forced impregnation according to her “maximizes the pain of rape” both physically and emotionally by making it “more difficult for them to resume any semblance of normal life.”¹⁵²

Meherjaan is able to restructure her life in terms of the normal patterns of family and culture primarily because she chooses to flee from her own country to Pakistan. The migration does not ensure a complete erasure of the physical and emotional trauma but it certainly offers her a medium of rebuilding her life without the pain and humiliation of living within her family and community. The child which is conceived through rape is also granted a degree of legitimacy because it is born within the constructs of a legal marriage as opposed to being born without the identity of the father. Layek Khan may or may not have fathered the child but by assuming paternal responsibility he affords the child a right of familial and cultural ownership. After all, the child shared the blood of his people.

At first glance, Layek Khan’s wife understood that I was expecting. She said, “I pray to Allah that you have a girl. I have two sons and they hardly look towards me. They always accompany their father to work, to the market, everywhere. If I had a daughter she would be able to help me with my household work and I would have someone to confide in.” I thought to myself, “She knows nothing of the misfortune of being born a girl, therefore she yearns for one. If I had a daughter, I would have probably throttled her to death.” Even Layek Khan expressed his desire for a daughter. But of course, they receive money at their daughter’s wedding and in their country the population of women is scarce. Therefore they are so fond of their daughters...Finally I gave birth to a son. He was healthy and had taken after his father. I thanked god that it wasn’t a girl. Even in my adversity I could hold my son to my bosom and lie destitute on the streets. Gradually I

¹⁵² Rhonda Copelon, “Surfacing Gender: Re- engraving Crimes against Women in Humanitarian Law,” *Hastings Women’s Law Journal* 5, no. 2 (1994): 56.

became acquainted with the neighbouring families. Layek Khan was given a pension by the army and he took up the job of a night guard at the house of a military officer.¹⁵³

By examining the history of Bangladesh and the relationship between East and West Pakistan, it may be inferred that racial identity and culture served to be the foremost dividing factor causing the formation of two factions, one of which was perceived to be inferior to the other. An entrenched notion of patrilineal descent, coupled with the Pakistani national ideology led to the belief that the Bengali community living in East Pakistan was not only ethnically different but also physically and culturally weak as compared to the West. The policy of ethnic cleansing and forced impregnation during the war may be logically founded on the belief that by wiping out the Bengali community and breeding children with Bengali women it would be possible to replace the existing community and make the future generation more 'Pakistani'. Layek Khan also voices a similar belief when he regards Meherjaan simply as a symbolic vessel of reproduction and his child as being "fully" Pashtun. His son would grow up within the Muslim community as a true Pathan and retain allegiance to his own people and country instead of identifying with his Bengali mother.

It is perhaps this notion which drives Layek Khan to accept his son but disregard his wife. He wishes to entirely remove his son from her influence by taking him to his village where he would grow up with his other siblings (from Khan's first marriage) and be accepted into their society. Meherjaan, however, does not receive this privilege. She is neither given the legal status of being a wife within her husband's society nor is she allowed to fulfil her maternal role. She is consciously and intentionally excluded from consideration, her existence marginalized and her status as wife and mother constantly at threat.

She reveals her predicament when she talks about her son, Taj.

When Taj was five years old, my husband insisted on taking him to his village. Taj got ready in his finest clothes and with great fanfare went to live at his own house for two weeks. I consoled myself thinking that if not today then after ten years Layek will surely not be here anymore. Then at least my son would be able to proudly declare that he is a

¹⁵³ Nilima Ibrahim, *Ami Birangona Bolchi* (Dhaka: Jagriti Publication, 2010), 60.

Pathan first and then a Pakistani. Just like that time when even we would proudly proclaim that we were Bengali first, then Muslim, Pakistani and the rest. I tried to reassure myself by thinking that although I had borne Taj in my womb, he was Layek Khan's possession and now after five years I was returning it to him. But I don't know why I felt so empty from within like everything had lost its significance.¹⁵⁴

It is certain that Layek Khan's child would develop nationalistic tendencies towards his father's country even without realizing it and identify with his paternal lineage. In this respect, it is inconceivable that he would have any knowledge or memory of Bangladesh and the ethnically charged war that unleashed an unprecedented brutality in the history of his nation and of which he is a product. Meherjaan realizes this too.

Lately, Layek Khan had been going to his village very often. He said that his health was failing him and he could no longer continue with his work. He had to speak to 'sahib' and reach a settlement. I asked him what would happen to my Taj. Without any consideration, Layek Khan replied, "I will talk to 'begum sahib', she will keep you here and I'll send money for your maintenance every month. Taj will grow up with his brothers in our village. Besides, his 'Ammi' loves him very much. Don't worry about him." I was amazed at how simply Layek Khan found a solution to this problem. But how would I live without my son? I knew that I had to because my son had to know and identify with those of his community...I asked him softly, "When will you be going?" He replied, "I haven't decided yet, I will be staying here for four-six months and then leave." Yet again, I asked him, "But what would happen to Taj's education and school?" He replied roughly, "Did I not just tell you? His brothers are there to take his responsibility." His words left me lifeless like a statue. He would snatch my only son away from me and get rid of my responsibility by simply paying money. Although I had the courage, I lacked the strength to express my feelings. I was a Bengali girl who was on the brink of being abandoned by her husband in a foreign country. I was much younger than him so I did not dare raise my voice or express my indignation.¹⁵⁵

¹⁵⁴ Nilima Ibrahim, *Ami Birangona Bolchi* (Dhaka: Jagriti Publication, 2010), 60.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 61.

The relationship between mother and son develops despite all odds when Taj refuses to leave her and chooses to stay in Karachi at their new home. For Meharjaan, motherhood assures her a sense of freedom. Although forcefully thrust on her, motherhood serves as a principle according to which she chooses to conduct her life. She takes to stitching and embroidery as a means of earning a livelihood. In due course of time, she sets up a training school for local women, which provides her a modest income of five to seven thousand each month. Meanwhile she also completes her college education. Her financial independence underlies her determination to fulfil all parental responsibility towards her son without the support of her husband. Layek Khan's decision to leave proves beneficial for Meherjaan since it elicits for the first time a responsive orientation on the part of the child towards his mother. However, Layek Khan's absence and the consequent distance from his son create a challenge for the culturally inherited image of parenthood, in which the physical presence of the father is of crucial importance. In a traditional Islamic society, this challenge is interpreted as a cultural tension. The concept of the 'family' is not understood as synonymous with 'home' but more so with the idea of 'kinship'.

As a mother, Meherjaan begins with the nurturance of the child and develops a close physical and psychological bond with him but she also realizes that her social relational tasks are supremely limited within the socio-cultural context of his birth and upbringing. In the first place, the father appears as a representation of origin, the foundation of the family as an institution. Secondly, in a historically masculine culture such as that of the 'Pashtuns' with distinct male gender roles focussing on power, assertiveness and dominance it is essential for the son to emulate the father. Motherhood therefore puts Meherjaan in a situation of extreme vulnerability. She must serve as a reference for her son in the context of the imagined father (who has gone far away or simply does not exist in the lives of his children). Through Meherjaan's testimony the tension appears spontaneously but it is also complemented by the presence of an element of will to persevere. In this regard, it is interesting to observe Meherjaan's own sense of estrangement with her husband. Despite his absence, she does not at any point fail to recognize his contribution towards their child.

After my husband who had sheltered me for so long left us abruptly, I was overwhelmed by a strange sense of loss and fear. I wondered, "If I had been his legally wedded wife, would he have been able to abandon me in this manner?" No, he hadn't married me. I

was simply a burden on his shoulders. But I could not complain. For so many years he had sheltered me, given me the respect and dignity of being his wife, that was enough for me. Above all by accepting Taj as his son, he had truly made me a 'birangona'. What was most surprising was that this strong, well built elderly Pathan had never doubted me or my son. Not even once.¹⁵⁶

Consequently, Layek Khan's death serves as a psychological turning point in Meherjaan's narrative. The quality of their marriage and family relationships prior to his departure at once assumes a secondary position as Meherjaan is immersed in grief at the loss of her protector. Despite the ambivalence in their relationship, Meherjaan perceives Layek Khan's death as a loss that can never be compensated primarily because he had never tried to define his existence over her own. She mourns for him as a wife but realizes the more fundamental loss of a son at the death of his father. She understands that this increased maternal instrumentality in her son's life in conjunction with the lack of opportunity to interact with his father may have irreversibly altered her own relationship with Taj. She observes:

Within six months, Layek Khan passed away. His eldest son came to take Taj back to their village. I became cold like a corpse on hearing the news. He told me, "Badi Ammi has asked you to forgive Abba. Otherwise his soul will not rest in peace." I let out a cry of pain and grief. Taj held me in his arms, his eldest son started weeping. I told him, "Your Amma is like my elder sister, please give her my 'salaam'. Whenever you feel like, please come to visit us at Karachi." They both left. Layek Khan had granted me eternal freedom. But freedom is not bought so easily. Allah has his way of controlling our lives. Taj returned after performing the last rites of his father. It seemed as if he had aged overnight. He used to talk to me all the time before, our conversations never ran out. But now he just sat quietly, without speaking much. I realized that perhaps the death of his father had created a lifelong rift between the two of us. He had found his roots there.¹⁵⁷

Meherjaan later considers revisiting her family in Bangladesh which reveals that she may have found a way to view, adapt, and evaluate her life change in a positive way. Although her past

¹⁵⁶ Nilima Ibrahim, *Ami Birangona Bolchi* (Dhaka: Jagriti Publication, 2010), 61.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 61.

makes her social location precarious and it is likely that making her way home would lead her to disrespect, indifference and hostility, Meherjaan cannot overcome the perfectly hopeless dream of revisiting her homeland. The motherland is repeatedly and explicitly connected with memory throughout her testimony. The endurance of Meherjaan's memory is enhanced and secured by the letters she receives from her brother warmly inviting her to attend his marriage. The decision to return to Bangladesh occurs at a time when the foundations of an oppressive political regime have been laid down and the moral importance of recognizing the contribution of 'birangonas' politically sanctioned. However, it is unclear how thoroughly social considerations inflect Meherjaan's understanding of her homeland and her position in the contemporary social order. The evaluative boundaries and proportions that shape and reveal a current sense of events and situations are justifiably missing in Meherjaan since she has already forfeited all ties with her country in the past. It is her personal history intimately connected with her home and family which influences her choice of revisiting Bangladesh. Almost certainly this reconstructive character of her memory is misleading since it temporarily dismisses the painful impressions formed during the years of conflict.

Nowadays I feel like going back to visit my country once. Baba is no more. My elder brother is now married. Even my younger brother will be getting married soon. He wrote to me saying that he would let me know in advance so that I could attend his wedding. I would face no difficulty. We have a two storey house now. Our shop at Narsinghdi has expanded over the past few years. There has been a new bridge built over the river. In half an hour one can reach Dhaka. In my imagination, I can visualize my home. The trees, the river, the boats, the fish are all present as they were yesterday, only I am not there. I am lost to them, everyone has forgotten me. But how can I possibly forget them? Why is it that my country is pulling me towards it? I decided to go back even before my brother's wedding. There was no need for an occasion anymore...I expressed my desire to go to Bangladesh to my son one day. I was surprised to see that he seemed happy with my decision. He said, "Why don't you go and visit? I will not be able to go due to my work. They will not give me a leave. But afterwards, even I will try to join you." I felt a sense

of reassurance and encouragement at his words. I had to decide on the arrangements soon.¹⁵⁸

The meeting between Meherjaan and the author, Nilima Ibrahim is precipitated at this juncture when she hears that a group of women delegates from Bangladesh had come to Karachi for a conference and rushes to her benefactor, Salma Begum's house to meet them. Her enthusiasm reveals a sense of emotional comfort as she prepares herself to meet these Bengali women who were from her own country. Meherjaan admits, "My spirit soared like a bird. I didn't even think it necessary to find out their names. I had only heard of Sufia Kamal in Dhaka but had never seen her." She fondly prepares a fish curry for them remembering how Bengali's prefer fish to anything else in this world. She remarks sheepishly that even in the midst of all her misery she could never enjoy eating rice without a piece of fish.

However, Meherjaan does not perceive the situation as likely to produce any unpredictable or negative outcome. Neither does she reflect upon the anxiety or distress of meeting women who might potentially seek to investigate or understand her past. The meeting might have had several ambiguous and threatening facets including the uncertainty about what will happen or what will be asked. The fear of recognition and the embarrassment of social judgement which operate within the victim concerning a sensitive issue such as rape fail to establish a stronghold on her as she happily greets the ladies. Meherjaan is formally introduced to the party with terms of dignity and endearment. Salma Begum addresses her as her younger sister, who is involved in handicraft and provides training and employment to ten-twelve local women. The admiration she perceives in the eyes of the guests leaves Meherjaan at a loss for words. But her inarticulation essentially stems from identifying one of the ladies in the group who had perhaps remembered her as well. It was the same lady who had held her hand many years ago on the day of departure and asked Meherjaan to remain with her in Bangladesh.

The interaction between Meherjaan and Nilima Ibrahim is hence explicated as the two recognize each other and their mutual history.

¹⁵⁸Nilima Ibrahim, *Ami Birangona Bolchi* (Dhaka: Jagriti Prokashoni, 2010), 62.

The next day after lunch, I told Apa my story. From time to time, she held my hand in hers. When I finally finished speaking, we were both in tears. She said, “Meher, that day I had felt sorry for you. But today I am relieved that I don’t bear the guilt of building your grave in Bangladesh. In reality, we have not managed to secure any position of respect or compensation for the women who suffered so grievously during the war. You know in 1973, a lady from France came to meet me in Dhaka. She became very close to me. During World War II, she was captured by the German forces and faced such brutality and violence, that she lost her ability to conceive a child. Later on, she did eventually marry. But she understood the pain and suffering of those girls who despite having a husband had lost their whole world. She would be happy to help any woman like her in my country. Even after so many years, the pain of being childless is still wedged in her heart. But in Bangladesh, there is no one who deserves such social and national honour. Even if there are, they choose to remain unknown. I am very happy to see you and to see the strength with which you carry yourself. Please come to Dhaka, we will include you as a representative in our Women’s Association. Saying this, Apa left.¹⁵⁹

Meherjaan’s journey to Bangladesh after the restoration of independence presents new opportunities for the ‘birangona’ to re-establish physical links with her homeland. Her visit to Bangladesh completes the process of integration as it bolsters a sense of home and belonging within her, which had remained dormant for so many years. The possibility of visiting and travelling freely around the homeland, meeting with family and relatives, and seeing the places where one grew up modifies previously bitter feelings towards the country and people. It allows Meherjaan the opportunity to re-evaluate their attitudes towards her as well as her attitude towards them. The desire to retain untainted the images of the homeland from a pre-war childhood overrides a mixture of practical and identity based considerations.

The re-opening of the links between the homeland and the individual initiates a process of evolution where aspects of their new identities can be expressed more freely and more fully. Yet the strengthened influence of the country which has served as her home for so many years (Pakistan) is impossible to demean. The confused nature of national and cultural identities is

¹⁵⁹ Nilima Ibrahim, *Ami Birangona Bolchi* (Dhaka: Jagriti Publication, 2010), 63.

indeed hard to resolve. While Meherjaan feels that she belongs in both places, she simultaneously realizes that she belongs in neither. These feelings of difference are perhaps exacerbated by the fact that she is completely unprepared for the exalted glorification she receives as a 'birangona' on her return. So strong are the roots of memory that she cannot entirely wipe out the experience of social condemnation and ridicule she had faced at the moment of her departure.

I arrived at Dhaka airport. This was my first visit here. As a prisoner, we had travelled by road to the Bangladesh-India border. The women had come to receive me at the airport with garlands. I was put up at the Sheraton hotel. I went to my room and called my elder brother at his shop in Narsinghdi. He answered immediately. My voice was quivering with excitement. I told him that there was a two day programme organized here. I asked him to come on Thursday so that I could go home with him. In the end I could hardly speak as I choked on my tears. My father and mother were no longer alive. What kind of a strange, unfamiliar place was I planning to go to? The seminar was held followed by a reception. I was invited to several places for dinner. I met Apa (Nilima Ibrahim) frequently during that period. Her aged face lit up with happiness every time she saw me. Perhaps she thought that there was one girl who had finally emerged victorious from her struggles. Had I managed to live up to the title of 'birangona'? Of course I had. Everywhere I went she introduced me as her student's younger sister. I had never imagined I would receive such warmth, love and respect. But there was still a poisonous thorn lodged in my heart. I knew that no matter how hard I tried I could never stop the bleeding. It was my passport which said: Wife of Layek Khan, Nationality: Pakistani. I thought to myself, "Allah you have given me so much without ever wanting, but what about all that I have lost?" This was my lifelong punishment for having abandoned my country to preserve my own being.¹⁶⁰

The physical location of childhood memories returns to haunt Meherjaan instead of providing her the comfort of reflection as she undertakes on a journey back to her home. The home and the interconnectedness of complex family relationships produce a typical dissonance in her

¹⁶⁰ Nilima Ibrahim, *Ami Birangona Bolchi* (Dhaka: Jagriti Publication, 2010), 63.

consciousness. This is not uncommon among survivors who oscillate between feelings of identification and alienation upon returning to the places where the trauma had originally occurred. Meherjaan remembers the exact spot where her mother lay lifeless on the night she was forcefully taken from her home. She tries to locate her favourite 'shiuli' tree in the backyard but realizes that it has been cut down by her brother, Lalu. The home ironically reveals the subversive potential of images that operate within the victim to remind her of the incidents of the past. It does not offer the scope of reconciliation.

The acute interrelatedness of the body and the land signifies that the final passage of Meherjaan from her homeland back to Pakistan would not be rendered easy or psychologically comfortable. Her retreat to Pakistan engenders feelings of extreme guilt and outrage within the subject. But Meherjaan realizes that her tormented relationship with her own country and people would not permit her the opportunity of expressing her allegiance to her homeland. The main door of the house is kept shut throughout her visit indicating a persistent obscurity that surrounds her identity and essentially her existence within the customs of her family and society. A fear of discovery haunts her brothers just as the natural environment of her home and village terrifies Meherjaan. She cannot adequately commemorate her mother's death in words but is constantly traumatized by the recurrence of ghastly images which refuse to grant her any peace.

For Meherjaan, an articulation of internalized pain and suffering cannot be achieved even within the intimate confines of her home as she experiences a feeling of suffocation brought about by the stark unfamiliarity of her surrounding and the imposed silences that had initially made the traumatic event so unforgettable. The measured silence of her family who refuse to divulge details pertaining to the lives of relatives and neighbours amplifies the hidden message that they do not encourage further communication or involvement than what is permissible by the standards of their society. As an unwanted visitor, Meherjaan wishes to escape the strictures of a false sense of hospitality and belonging which desperately sought to replace the signs of discord and tension within her family.

I didn't ask them about our relatives or neighbours. Even they didn't volunteer any information. The main door remained closed the entire day. Perhaps they hadn't informed anyone about my visit. I thought, "After all why would they want to destroy the peace and happiness in their lives?" I invited Lalu and Milu to visit Pakistan and decided to

leave in the evening. They requested me to stay for the night. But I couldn't. I felt suffocated. I simply wondered, "Why had I returned to this empty graveyard to see the remains of my past?"¹⁶¹

As she makes her way back to Dhaka, an odd sensation of ease and comfort sweeps over her. "I was able to breathe freely once again", she states. Meherjaan is relieved of the forced appearances that had prevented the exchange of any real feeling or emotion, she resolves to never return again but this freedom is complicated by the tenuous desire to be assimilated within the heart of the nation she held so dear. As Theodor Adorno stated in his exilic writings: "Distance is not a safety zone, but a field of tension."¹⁶² the new grounds of identity and belonging are equally fraught with tension despite the distance Meherjaan manages to achieve from her homeland. The post independence experience of returning to the homeland produces feelings of both sameness and difference and these entangled tensions relate to the belief that perhaps the 'imagined' or remembered homeland is better than the actual or physical one. Meherjaan is seen grappling with the conflicting assumptions and expectations concerning her return to the family. Simultaneously, her thoughts are disrupted by already unstable and ambivalent bases of loyalty, affiliation and identity.

Meherjaan narrates the tremendous personal and symbolic upheaval she experiences on her departure:

Before leaving, my elder brother handed me a small red velvet box. My father had left a necklace for Taj. I took it from him and raised it to my forehead as the symbol of my father's blessing. I quickly got on to the jeep that was waiting outside. There was darkness all around me but I was able to breathe freely once again. I realized that I lacked the strength or nerve to return to my country. I had gained everything in life but I had lost my homeland. I decided then that I would never come back again. I begged my motherland for her forgiveness. I didn't have the courage to face death and my desire to live had caused me to abandon and hence lose my homeland. This was my sin. I couldn't

¹⁶¹ Nilima Ibrahim, *Ami Birangona Bolchi* (Dhaka: Jagriti Publication, 2010), 63.

¹⁶² Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, trans. E. F. N. Jephcott (London: NLB, 2003), 126-127.

expect forgiveness since I knew that I did not deserve it. I was a nameless destitute who had floated back to my homeland in search of redemption.¹⁶³

Meherjaan reaches an awareness of the fact that her identity as a 'birangona' in her country is formulated in contextual and relational terms to the war and it invariably mitigates her own conception of self-identity. In this regard, Ibrahim's assessment of the country's collective failure in recognizing the contribution of the 'birangonas' and providing them their due position rings true as Meherjaan perceives the symptomatic neglect within her own people and society. Locality and memories of the conflict along with their contingent socio-cultural manifestations became central to the formation of identity in Bangladesh in the post-war period. In the case of Meherjaan, it far outweighs the familiar cultural spaces and continuities built over years of shared experiences and memories which the survivor distinguishes as the basis of identity construction. The incongruity in social roles and identities arises at this juncture undermining the strength of Meherjaan's self belief.

Meherjaan perceives her sin of leaving the country as a form of injustice or injury caused towards her own motherland. She recognizes, although without directly referring to it, that she has been unable to pay her debts to her homeland. The idea of debt arises out of a right or sense of ownership which she feels towards her country. This transference may seem perfectly legitimate and harmless but it is complicated by the fact that her homeland has essentially disowned her and removed her from its existence. Ironically, she perceives her sin of abandonment as injustice in a strict sense but fails to challenge the injustice which has been done to her by her own country which failed to protect and nurture her during her direst hour. Tradition and perhaps her own conservatism prevent her from doing so. The satisfaction of atonement is presented to her through the journey back to Bangladesh but the justification of this view is entirely personal and cannot be clarified by general reasoning. In fact, Meherjaan herself questions the absurdity of her reason when she claims that there was no sense in returning to an 'empty graveyard' to witness the 'remains of her past'.

The lack of necessary national political will for a comprehensive integration process is inadequately addressed by Meherjaan, which perhaps jeopardizes the cause of social justice

¹⁶³Nilima Ibrahim, *Ami Birangona Bolchi* (Dhaka: Jagriti Prokashoni, 2010), 64.

instead of simply overlooking it. She considers it her individual moral obligation to return to her homeland in search of reparation. The ‘original sin’ of abandoning her country at the hour of its need remains embedded in her consciousness and operates to produce feelings of shame and guilt. She had accessed another world at a time when she should have perhaps clung to her home and people in an effort to proclaim their national unity and cultural identity. But Meherjaan recognizes that this choice would have essentially compromised her existence. The psychological disturbance or tension does not arise as much from physical detachment as it does from the conflicting notions of loyalty and betrayal.

The potential conflicts of loyalty within her mind are further aggravated by the fact that Meherjaan chose to migrate to Pakistan, the nation which had been responsible for the destruction of her homeland and native community. However in the context of the war, Meherjaan learns through her experience that perhaps national loyalty and belief in the systems of political justice and social compensation were not identical. She had therefore, chosen to deflect to Pakistan with Layek Khan instead of remaining rooted in her homeland under circumstances which were incompatible with her survival. An aggressive nationalism would have created more troublesome difficulties for her in the future instead of providing her the cushion of social acceptance and symbolic glorification.

At the end of her testimony, Meherjaan seeks forgiveness from her motherland for the ‘sin’ of abandoning her guardianship. The idea of her ‘sinfulness’ is equivocal because although Meherjaan feels she has sinned, it is actually she who has been wronged and abused. Her family and nation failed to protect her when she was abducted and raped, and failed again when they were unable to provide a mechanism for healing and survival within the fold of the nation after liberation. There is a surprising constancy evident in her attitude despite the wide cultural and national indifference she has endured. She does not claim the prestige of being a ‘birangona’ upon her return but seeks reconciliation with her land and people. In this context, her return to Bangladesh may well be understood not as an outlet for super-patriotism or ethnocentricity but as an attempt to restore the personal values of loyalty and faith towards a homeland which can now only be ‘imagined’ in memory instead of being ‘lived’ in reality.

In both these accounts – of Tara and Meherjaan – there are two layers of traumatic recall. One of the sexual violence they were subject to and the subsequent violation of their body and

psyche, the other, of the rejection of their person from the fold of the family, community and nation. Their trauma can be read through the tropes of abortion, of being orphaned or exiled which repeatedly occur through their narratives.

CHAPTER 4: SHAHEED JANANI: ‘POLITICAL MOTHERHOOD’

(4.1)The March of Memory: Martyrs and Survivors

This chapter primarily seeks to extend the argument that the construction of the ‘shaheed janani’ as a state martyr was also a means of contributing to the nationalist discourse on the Liberation War. The chapter will closely examine Jahanara Imam’s *Ekattorer Dinguli* as a memory of trauma and resistance remembering the crisis of mothers who lost their sons in the war. It will examine the crisis of the judiciary and human rights organizations in addressing war crimes, leading to the dissolution of survivor narratives within the corpus of official history. Further, it will reflect on the mobilization of social and intellectual groups in the collective mass movement which has been set afoot in Bangladesh since the 1990’s and the role of civil society in restoring individual testimonies and narratives and negotiating the process of justice for war crimes.

In the years immediately following the Bangladesh Liberation War (1971) the initiatives undertaken to try the war crimes and violation of human rights that had been committed by the Pakistani army and their local collaborators did not meet with much success. In fact the newly formed government, which had immersed itself in the more lucrative project of nation building and political consolidation paid little attention to the issue of redressing human atrocities. It was therefore not surprising that the first initiative to bring light to the crimes that had been committed against the people was conducted by citizens’ group. On 29th December, 1971 only thirteen days after the signing of the peace treaty and the official declaration of independence, Zahir Raihan, a noted writer and film maker formed a commission to investigate the alleged disappearance and killing of Bengali intellectuals during the months of conflict. Raihan’s disappearance on 30th January, 1972 trying to locate his brother and eminent writer, Shahidullah Kaiser disrupted his efforts and the work of the commission was stopped.

It was only much later on 21st March, 1981 that the decision to form a ‘Gana Adalat’ (People’s Court) to try those accused was declared under the initiative of retired Lt Col Kazi Nuruzzaman and Sector Commander Bir Uttam (Sector 7) who was also the presiding chairman of the Bangladesh Muktiyoddha Sangsad. It took another eleven years for this public demand to materialize into action and under the leadership of Jahanara Imam the Ekattorer Ghatak Dalal Nirmul Committee (Committee for Realization of Bangladesh Liberation War Ideals and Trial of War Criminals) assumed the responsibility of effectively launching an offensive against the political complacency and state immunity provided to the collaborators of the Pakistani army.

Imam’s common background and the absence of any political relations drew thousands in support of her cause and the public outcry forced the ruling Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) government to reckon with their demands. Despite Jamaat-e-Islami’s continuous propaganda, the movement could not be repressed. People working across the nation at both national and local levels demonstrated in favour of war tribunals and the committee set up its first Gana Adalat on the 21st anniversary of Bangladesh’s independence (26th March, 1992) to hear the conviction of Ghulam Azam, one of the chief collaborators of the Pakistani army, who planned the systematic killing of innocent Bengalis and the rape of nearly two lakh women.

At the core of the Bangladeshi people’s post war activism stood a host of social justice causes, including civil rights and women’s equality, but central to it was peace and reconciliation. The movement included the endeavours of women towards political participation, especially peace activism that took them out of their homes and challenge emerging liberal ideology which sought to shelter those accused of committing unthinkable atrocities against the commons. Balancing the personal and political while performing their social roles as mothers, wives, daughters, and waged workers was increasingly complicated in the domestic context however the participation of women transformed the narrative of social movement history in Bangladesh by including all sections of civil society.

Before her death in June 1994, Imam wrote to her countrymen that the movement still had a long way to go. In her opinion, there was no one as trustworthy as the ordinary people to realize the ideals of the Liberation War, where there was no place for the war criminals. She handed over the responsibility to carry on the Ekattorer Ghatak Dalal Nirmul Shommonoy Andolon to the people of Bangladesh.

The International Crimes Tribunal (Bangladesh) formed by the Awami League government in 2009 to investigate and prosecute the collaborators of the Pakistani army responsible for the genocide bore fruit to her tireless efforts and brought justice to an emotionally wounded people. According to reports, nine leaders of Jamaat-e-Islami party, and two of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party were called upon to answer to charges of sympathy and collaboration with the Pakistani army during the Liberation War. The conviction and sentencing of three Jamaat-e-Islami leaders, most prominently, Abul Kalam Azad, in the year 2012 and 2013 was a victory for the people and a fulfilment of Imam's vision for Bangladesh.

Recognized as 'Shaheed Janani', Imam's eldest son, Shafi Imam Rumi was martyred during the Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971. Leaving aside a promising career in the West, Rumi had enrolled as a 'Muktijoddha' and undergone extensive training in guerrilla warfare in Melaghar, Agartala. The Melaghar camp was later recognized as one of the primary interventions on the part of India in providing military aid to the cause of Bangladeshi Liberation. He joined the Dhaka Crack Platoon on 5th June, 1971, a special commando division of the 'Mukti Bahini' which was known to carry out swift, lethal operations using guerrilla tactics to counter the brutal and systematic killing of Bengali civilians and intelligentsia by the Pakistani army in and around Dhaka. Among the operations undertaken by the Crack Platoon, the most successful were the bombing of the Siddhirganj Power Station to destabilize the power supply in Dhaka and the Dhanmondi Operation, which was a series of hit and run attacks aimed at eradicating key military guards and soldiers on duty. Rumi's participation in the operations of the Crack Platoon was lauded by his comrades particularly after the successful assault at Dhanmondi which was chiefly precipitated by the efforts of Rumi and a few other young guerrilla operatives.

Days after the attack, on the night of 29th August, 1971 Rumi along with his father, younger brother, Jami and his cousin were picked up from their residence by members of the Pakistani intelligence for questioning. Rumi, however, was singled out among them and withheld separately along with almost all the 'Muktijoddhas' who had been a part of the Dhanmondi Operation. They were taken to the Dhaka Cantonment for a series of interrogation and on 4th September, 1971 Jami and his friend Sharif were released after the brutal torture that they had to endure during their period of incarceration.

Rumi and his comrades, Azad, Jewel, Altaf and Bodi never returned, presumably murdered by the military junta. Jami reported that Rumi and his comrade Bodi had admitted to playing the role of the key masterminds and perpetrators of the Dhanmondi attack and advised his family to claim that they had no knowledge of the operation. They had offered themselves for martyrdom.

They had essentially assumed the role of martyrs by presenting testimony of their own crime and by disclosing their identity as 'Muktijoddhas'. Situated in a complex political and social sphere, the same act of violence which had made their memory famous among their comrades had brought about their end while their families stood as hapless bystanders. However, martyrdom was a living experience in the war time state culture. It not only encompassed the lives of thousands of young Bengali men but also their families. It was not a moment of self sacrifice in a moment of despair. Martyrdom was rooted in the individual and collective distress based on a sense of complete injustice and the absence of any means to establish justice except by putting their bodies on the line. The liberation war which led to the emergence of Bangladesh as a political entity ended in one of worst carnages in national history. While many cultures openly deny that genocide has occurred in their countries, in the case of Bangladesh the politics of intervention, or lack thereof, are controversial on an international level. The international community was so far removed from the form of plan and practise which was essentially intended to destroy a socio-ethnic group that it was impossible to comprehend the extent of the crimes committed and the daily life of the citizens in war torn Bangladesh.

The genocide conducted by the West Pakistani forces could not be justified except for its political and national intent. For the government of Pakistan, the genocide played a significant, albeit odious role in crushing the domestic politics which was dangerously shifting towards a form of self determination in the Eastern half of the country. The preservation of human life throughout the term of time willed by God is a duty prescribed by Sharia. The value of Islamic international human rights and its rules and principles against the crime of mass killing is very specific in this regard. The Islamic doctrine and criminal law prohibits any type of collective killing of groups who are non-combatant and this is irrespective of whether the victims of the crime belong to other groups which may or may not share the nationality of one of the conflicting parties. In this respect genocide may be regarded as a crime against humanity and a breach of the Sharia laws. To employ such violence in repressing the Bengali Muslim and Hindu

communities in East Pakistan may therefore be interpreted as a violation of the general framework of Islamic law and culture. However, the growing non-governmental opposition movement in East Pakistan, conducted by the intelligentsia and members of civil society was perceived as an additional threat, with the Pakistani military junta further suspecting that a prominent role in the liberation assistance program was being served by its neighbouring country, India. While the intended impact of this Liberation War brought with it the prospect of political revolution, civil unrest and armed conflict, it was certainly not imagined that the insurgency would assume the form of a devastating genocide.

The ‘Mukti Bahini’ which was created in April 1971 under the Provisional Government of Bangladesh as a counter agency constituted a formal military leadership and the civilian forces or ‘Gonobahini’. The military organization had a specific ideological presupposition. It was an act of self affirmation directed to claim the autonomy of the nation state and of its people. It emerged as a collective attempt to end an impasse by imposing forcible measures and securing the sovereignty of the nation through armed combat. In the light of the events of 1971, particularly ‘Operation Searchlight’ conducted by the Pakistani army to brutally suppress the rising nationalist sentiment among Bengalis, many young men frustrated by the limited opportunities and largely motivated by the discourse on Independence enlisted in the ranks of the ‘Muktibahini’ through personal initiative. In the early months of the Liberation War, an emerging erosion of the rigid state ideology and a growing need for self determination led to public manifestations with young men considering an active role in military life in order to secure the purpose of Independence. The shift in values meant that many young people withdrew from exploring business careers in the economy’s cooperative sector and took to joining associations and movements with the aim of serving the nation.

For many young people, loyalty to the state and its national security priorities gained precedence over individual life and comfort. Shafi Rumi for instance was enrolled as a student at the Illinois Institute of Technology but chose to participate in the war instead. The dramatic growth of nationalistic beliefs and practices witnessed thousands of competent young men submitting their conscription not only to the ‘Gonobahini’ or people’s army but also the ‘Niomito Bahini’ or regular forces who were known as the ‘Mukti Fauj’ consisting of the military, paramilitary and police forces of East Pakistan. As Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the first

President of the People's Republic of Bangladesh and later Prime Minister from March, 1971 to August, 1975 in his famous speech from the Ramna Race Course on 7th March, 1971, reminded his countrymen, "The struggle this time is the struggle for our emancipation. The struggle this time is for our Independence.", the entire nation rallied for the cause of liberation.

In contrast to the devotion towards the military by the war time generation, a relatively wide societal debate on the issue of martyrdom and justice was kindled in the political campaigns and public demonstrations which followed after the Liberation of Bangladesh. Although the young men who had sacrificed their lives for the country were awarded the social prestige of martyrs or 'shaheed', the collective euphoria and state honour became a convenient means of overlooking the question of justice. Justice for the mass killing of patriots and innocents was either delayed or denied. For instance, it was as late as 18th July, 2013 that Ali Ahsan Mohammad Mojaheed was found guilty and awarded a life sentence on the charge of murder and being complicit in the killing of Shafi Rumi and his friends Bodi, Jewel, Azad and Altaf Mahmud at the army camp set up in Nakhalpara, Dhaka in September, 1971. Ali Ahsan Mohammad Mojaheed had in fact served as a Member of Parliament and the Minister of Social Welfare in Bangladesh from 2001 to 2007 until he was sentenced to death by the International Crimes Tribunal of Bangladesh on 22nd November, 2015 for his close association and active involvement with the 'Al-Badr' razakar paramilitary forces during the Liberation War.

Martyrdom or the concept of 'shaheed' in combat has a strong ideological currency in most countries and cultures. In Bangladesh, the highest military honour of 'Bir Sreshtho' followed by 'Bir Uttom', 'Bir Bikrom' and 'Bir Protik' in decreasing order of importance were introduced immediately after the Liberation War of 1971. The Bangladesh Gazette published the names of seven 'shaheed' officers, who were awarded the 'Bir Sreshtho' title on 15th December, 1973. As such, a body of wartime literature emerged that was fundamentally enchanted with battlefield death. In novels and short stories published during and after the war, martyrdom was repeatedly portrayed as a positive and an essentially productive act. To die as a martyr was an achievement, an honourable act, enviable by those who could not make such a service to the country. Jahanara Imam's diary, 'Ekattorer Dinguli', attempts to resignify martyrdom and the notion of meaningful death. Besides dedicating years of her life towards the cause of bringing justice to a wounded nation she significantly alters the predictable depictions of the 'war hero' that had come to be

normalized in war time fiction through an intimate account of her personal experience. The effort to shape memory more accurately is undertaken by stripping away all value from the act of martyrdom and reducing it to its most fundamental, corporeal meaning: death.

Regardless of the circumstances of death, the ideology of martyrdom does not hold true for families receiving the bodies of their sons, husbands or fathers. In certain cases, as is common in cultures wrecked by the gruesome reality of genocide, the bodies are never recovered, perhaps forgotten in unmarked mass graves. The martyrdom of her son, Shafi Rumi thus emerges as a flashpoint marking a memorial site of struggle where Imam challenges the ideology of war and the notion of martyrdom as opposed to the grief of death and the experience of bereavement.

Sheikh Mujibur, in his historic 7th March, 1971 speech, spoke of martyrdom:

Today I appear before you with a heavy heart. You know and understand everything. We tried with our lives. But the painful matter is that now the streets of Dhaka, Chittagong, Khulna, Rajshahi and Rangpur are stained with the blood of my brothers. Now the people of Bangla want freedom. The people of Bangla want to live. The people of Bangla want to have their rights...If one more shot is fired and if my people are killed again then my request to you is; build a fortress in each and every home. Face the enemy with whatever you have...You can't keep seven crores of people subjugated. Since we have learnt to die, no one can dominate us. We, from Awami League, will try our best to help those embracing martyrdom and those who have received injuries.¹⁶⁴

During the war, political leaders and activists continually referenced martyrdom, praising those who gave their lives on the warfront and assuring compensation for the loss to their families. For Sheikh Mujibur, martyrdom was ever present in his speeches during the 1971 Liberation War and even after that. The martyrs were not only celebrated but were 'alive' because their death had brought the country new life and their memory would never be erased from the minds of their countrymen. In West Pakistan (now Pakistan) the commemoration of war heroes or martyrs transformed defeat and militancy to victimhood and valour. Their martyrdom, however, is framed entirely within the ideological terms of the regime that drove their country to wage war

¹⁶⁴ Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, "7th March Speech", <https://www.7thmarch.com/the-speech-text/>

against the growing nationalism in the East, while suppressing any form of dissent or negotiation to the war effort.

In the event of the India-Pakistan War, 1971 which followed as a result of the issue concerning India's political cooperation with Bangladesh, the then President of Pakistan, General A.M. Yahya Khan also addressed his nation on the overwhelming importance of martyrdom in his speech delivered on 4th December, 1971.

Twelve crore 'Mujahids' of Pakistan! You have the blessings and support of Almighty Allah. Your hearts are pulsating with the love of the Holy Prophet. The enemy has once again challenged our self respect. For your survival and honour, rise up and face the enemy like an invincible rock. Yours is the cause of truth and justice. Inspired by your unflinching faith and confidence in the righteousness of your cause, attack the force of evil like the retribution of Almighty God. Show the enemy that each Pakistani is determined to defend his motherland. The valiant and courageous members of our armed forces have always stopped the advance of the enemy through their bravery and unprecedented gallantry. Undeterred by the numerical superiority of the enemy they are fighting him bravely at every front in accordance with the traditions of the 'Ghazis' of Islam.¹⁶⁵

In this regard, according to the Pakistani official narrative, their eternal fates were sealed by a cultural narrative of salvation and a religio-nationalist narrative of productive self sacrifice. Self sacrifice and meaningful death are portrayed as primarily religious, secondarily nationalistic endeavours. However, it seems that on both sides, the state monopolized the remembrance and martyrdom of the victims of conflict in order to depersonalize death. In wartime cultures, death becomes a routine ritual and martyrdom is considered a normative standard.

Jahanara Imam's *Ekatorrer Dinguli* in a sense personalizes the experience of martyrdom by projecting the daily trials and tribulations located within the larger concept of sacrifice and by rejecting the exalted vision of martyrdom through a narrowing of focus on the everyday particular.

¹⁶⁵ Shamsul Bari, *Bangladesh Newsletter* (Dhaka: Liberation War Museum, 2001), 158.

For the last week, the story of Karbala has resonated in every Bengali household. Thousands of 'Fatemas' have lost their sons, countless 'Sakinas' have lost their young husbands to the wounds of battles. The cry of death now rises from every household. We are all immersed in the grief of 'Marsiya'. But the poet has written, "This is the hour of sacrifice, Marsiya, not tears". Perhaps these words justify the sacrifice of the young blood of Bangla, who have abandoned the comforts of their home and taken to the streets of Dhaka with the hope of freedom. Last night there was a torchlight march organized by young Bengali men chanting the name of 'Banga Bandhu' and slogans of independence. We did not see it-Rumi, Fakir and Sharif were involved in an endless debate which extended till 11 o'clock at night. I received the news through my friend, Ruqaiyah's telephone.

There house is located at No. 8 Dhanmondi Main Road. The procession passed in front of their house, down Mirpur Road towards 'Banga Bandhu's' house. Ruqaiyah said, "You know, seeing all these revolutionaries, I felt like joining the march myself."¹⁶⁶

Jahanara Imam essentially challenges the ideology of martyrdom that the government promoted during the war by abstracting the sacrifices of these young men from the predictable depictions of state-sponsored war literature. Martyrdom was interpreted not as a disappointment or even a surprise, rather a sense of loss was perceived if martyrdom did not occur. The story of Hussain's martyrdom at Karbala, the most significant cultural text within Shi'ism is co-opted by Imam to provide a counterpoint to the official discourse on martyrdom which presented death as a normative phenomena. For Imam, the story of Hussain assumes a wholly different martyrology, since it is read in relation to the figure of the grieving mother, 'Fatema' and the desolate wife, 'Sakina'. Martyrdom is not only a part of hegemonic discourse or literature written with the blood of the martyr, it is a composite experience in the memory of the family and community.

In the context of official history, the concept of martyrdom is rooted in a love for homeland, honour and dignity. But for Imam, martyrdom is equally embedded in the experience of love which is sustained in the memory of family and in kinship structures. Imam therefore initiates a process of reimagining the paradigms of martyrdom. Death becomes a coded expression in the

¹⁶⁶ Jahanara Imam, *Ekattorer Dinguli* (Dhaka: Charulipi Publishers, 1986), 24.

rhetoric of state martyrdom. But Imam reflects that it is the actuality of death which frames the image of heroes and martyrs in the realm of private memory. The allure of death replete in the representation of martyrdom lies in opposition to the sense of perplexity and disenchantment expressed through personal narratives where the ordinary soldier and not the glorified martyr becomes the locus of imagination.

The status of the martyr in state narratives is to be celebrated rather than mourned. But for the mother who has lost her son, or the wife who has lost her husband, martyrdom involves constant reminders in dialogue and experience, the bereavement of their loved one. Imam's diary may therefore be read as a site of contesting predominant representations of public memory involving the position of the martyr in post-war society. The fear and corporeality of death remains implicit in personal memory despite the change in context.

An iron pincer seems to be ripping apart the sides of my ribcage. At times I can feel my throat choking till I can barely breathe. My vision is blurred and at every hour I feel a desperate cry emanating from within my soul. But the mother of a fish is not supposed to feel grief. The mother of a thief is not supposed to speak aloud. Ever since Rumi left, we play the cassette player at its pitch through the day. In the evening, the house comes alive with the brightness of electric lights in every room and the television blaring in the living room, indicating a joyous mood. The environment is rife with music, activity and lively conversations. All of this is only for the sake of appearances so that our neighbours don't suspect our heart rending grief. The sky too is heavy with the pain I feel inside. But unlike me, the sky does not have to control its tears. So very often it lets out a peel of sorrow and starts to pour.¹⁶⁷

The recollection of Rumi is stripped off any mention of glory and heroism that distinguishes a martyr. The narrative maintains a distance from ideology by avoiding the discourse on martyrdom. There is recognition of the physicality of pain and death which stems from experience. The relativity of experience defines the memory of the martyr marking Imam's narrative as a work of unofficial and oppositional writing. It brings forth a new comparative approach to public and personal memory. The shared remembering of Rumi rests not so much on

¹⁶⁷ Jahanara Imam, *Ekattorer Dinguli* (Dhaka: Charulipi Publishers, 1986), 125.

the construction of martyrdom but on the continuity of memory forming a family archive within the given context.

Jay Winter's analysis of the Great War in his book, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History* records that, "Commemorative ritual survives when it is inscribed within the rhythms of community and, in particular, family life. Public commemoration lasts when it draws about overlaps between national history and family history...Public reinforcements may help keep alive the ritual and practice of commemoration. But the event becomes hollow when removed from the myriad small-scale social units that breathed life into it in the first place."¹⁶⁸

The family therefore becomes an indispensable framework for recollecting the past and the martyr. Rumi is kept alive in the form of everyday communication (such as we would find it in families). Even in the absence of communication, Rumi's image is refracted in the shared knowledge of silence. The family remembers differently: the dynamics of everyday remembering in social contexts is operative within the family as opposed to a cumulative heroization which the nation state sponsors on special occasions or days of commemoration. It evokes a subjective need to remember the person and not the act of heroism. The memory culture within the family is marked by a particularization which is absent in national history. However, lapses of memory may occur even within the context of personal remembering. The form and content of memory evolves through time and the relationship between various mnemonic levels is not continuous. Family memory intersects with and draws on communicative remembering. Communication is a dynamic process which thrives on frequency. In the absence of oral communication or face to face interaction, a gap may develop in the temporal horizon and the meaning or materiality of memory may change.

Imam notes the complexities of family memory and communicative remembering in her diary account.

Today I came down with fever. Since yesterday I was suffering from a cold but I didn't care much. I continued with my everyday routine: household chores, running around

¹⁶⁸ Jay Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 71-72.

outside. How could I expect my poor body to bear such tortures...The entire day I lay on the couch in the dining room. In the evening, mother came to see me. She started bickering about how careless I was towards my health but without completing she fell silent. I know my mother cannot easily keep her thoughts or feelings to herself. She is prone to talking. But today she forcefully kept her mouth shut. However, from her creased eyebrows, pursed lips and tough stance, I could make out her tremendous yet quiet sense of indignation towards me. Being her own daughter, I was keeping the secret of Rumi's departure from her. Despite being torn apart by grief, I was not willing to share my plight with her. She could not bear to see me like this. Yet she was unable to say anything to me because of my unforgiving silence.¹⁶⁹

The memory of Rumi is located in the historical context of his departure i.e. historical time as well as within a generalized routine structure i.e. ritual time. Specific historical events actively negotiate the construction of family memory, however, everyday routine and rituals which are followed by the family as part of their cultural practise are by contrast more unique in their effect than distinctive landmarks which punctuate the passage of memory time. In Hindu cultures, the routine remembrance of the dead is symbolically embedded in the daily ritual of offering water or food or flowers to honour the memory of the person. Besides the religious or spiritual underpinnings of many such everyday rituals, they underlie a sense of family continuity and memory recall even in the absence of shared activities or speech. These rituals may also be interpreted as symbolic communication between the living members of the family and the dead. However, while these family rituals bring a sense of communicative belonging, there is also the danger of performing such rituals as habitual exercise without even realizing why we are doing them. There is often a hollow ritualization involved in family memory.

Rumi is also drawn into the realm of routine ritualization:

Mother said, 'You should offer another 'Kurbani' (sacrifice) in Rumi's name.' I said, 'Let's get a cow this time. Along with Rumi, let us also give 'Kurbani' in the name of Altaf, Bodi and Jewel. We soon bought a cow. Salimullah's orphanage was close to our home: near Ajimpur. The cow would be taken there for the 'Kurbani'. Our driver,

¹⁶⁹ Jahanara Imam, *Ektattorer Dinguli* (Dhaka: Charulipi Publishers, 1986), 144.

Amiruddi and a peon would walk till the orphanage with the cow. We made them both understand that on their way if any military official were to ask them where and why they were taking the cow, they were to simply refer to the orphanage. We warned them not to mention anything about a 'Kurbani' or reveal our address if they were asked where the cow was coming from. After half an hour, I gave Masoom a piece of paper with the names of Rumi, Bodi, Altaf, Jewel, Azad, Bashar and Hafiz written on it...I instructed him to tell the 'Maulavi' that after the 'Kurbani', he was to cook the meat and feed the orphans...All of these precautions had to be taken to prevent any kind of suspicion from falling on us. The military might arrest us if they get to know that we are offering 'Kurbani' in the name of a 'Muktijoddha'.¹⁷⁰

In the context of the family, the death of a child requires a two-fold adjustment. There is a need on the part of parents to reconcile themselves with the sudden loss and also the deprivation of a possible future. The manner in which the death is accepted is depends greatly on the means by which the bereaved are notified of its occurrence. Rumi's death is anticipated but not confirmed till the end. Two imperatives are simultaneously transmitted: "the person may be dead" and "the person may be alive". His fate at the military camp is unknown to the family and what appears as a form of detention initially soon becomes evident as a violent bereavement. The loss is experienced differently when the bereaved are present at the moment of death as opposed to when they merely have a sense of it without ever having seen the body of the person. Disbelief becomes a very distinctive and specific phenomenon in such cases since there is an absence of the physical body to confirm the fact of death.

"Sharif's colonel informed him that Rumi would be released after one day. Did I even believe him? Ever since Sharif returned yesterday, there has been a flood of relatives at our house. Everyone expressed their concern for Rumi. Why were they so concerned? Was there no hope of Rumi returning?"¹⁷¹

In *Ekattorer Dinguli*, as is common in most personal recollections of the bereaved, there is an attempt to reanimate the dead through a typically oral process of remembering. There is a continuation of the familiar bond with the deceased in the inner world of the mourner. The

¹⁷⁰ Jahanara Imam, *Ekattorer Dinguli* (Dhaka: Charulipi Publishers, 1986), 185.

¹⁷¹ Ibid., 193.

physical dissociation is balanced by the oral remembrance which operates as an unconscious defence against the emotional breakdown. Breuer and Freud (1895) termed the translation of the traumatic event into a verbal narrative, “catharsis”. Verbalizing the emotion often brings relief but it may be argued that in the realm of everyday experience, the act of verbal recollection is a medium of constructing a linguistic framework within which the memory of departed exists and persists despite the changes in context. Catharsis may be interpreted as a ventilation of the traumatic experience or even an aggressive outburst but the social and psychological circumstances associated with the death of the close one affects the symptoms of expressing grief and the beliefs and practises facilitating the coming to terms with loss. Rumi’s departure necessitates a prolonged period of suspense and mourning considering the variability of the socio-historical circumstances. He falls in the category of those who may be regarded as soldiers ‘disappeared’ in war. The ‘catharsis’ is therefore delayed and Imam’s testimony reveals a radically different coping mechanism to process the loss.

“It’s been thirty days since Rumi was taken away from me. During this period I have received no news my son. There is no news of the rest. The ‘peer baba’ has been constantly reassuring us that they are alive. Yet there is no way of finding out whether Altaf, Bodi, Jewel, Bashar, Hafiz, Mamun, Majid, Shamsul Haque, Jahangir are alive.”¹⁷²

The fear of recalling does not operate here in the case of the mother since the psychological disturbance is caused by the anticipation of death and not the reality of it. Rumi becomes the object of obsessive preoccupation because the raw fact of his death has not been directly confronted. Therefore, Imam’s personal narrative which is shaped by the flow of memories is not interrupted by the violent emotional rupture caused by death. Mourning for a missing person, Imam’s narrative does not reflect the usual categories of cathartic or pathological grief. She simply focuses on describing the observed phenomena and her assumptions of tragic loss. The scattered nature of the testimony is primarily because she remains preoccupied with the fantasies about her son’s return. Her regular visits to the ‘peer baba’ provide her an affirmation as a sorrowing, grieving mother.

¹⁷² Jahanara Imam, *Ekattorer Dinguli* (Dhaka: Charulipi Publishers, 1986), 211.

There is still no news of Rumi. Every day I go to meet 'Pagla baba', falling at his feet I cry. But he mostly remains silent, lost in mediation. He gets irritated if I disturb him too much. Yet we wait patiently at his house: me, my mother, Lalu, Musfeka Mahmud, his mother, Jhinu Mahmud, Shimul Billah, their four brothers, their mother, Najma Majid, Mahmuda Haque...A sort of companionship has made my heart grow fonder of these people. It feels as if they are my relatives. They appear as a part of my family.¹⁷³

Her doubts regarding her son are manifest by those around her and create a curious ambivalence between the denial and acceptance of loss. The mind facilitates an internal compromise as the mother works out her relationship to the loss of her son. Yet the painful uncertainty does not allow an unequivocal acceptance, leading to a sense of expectancy regarding news of her son. The flow of her thoughts or the march of memory, after its initial assuredness, becomes full of breaks and more confused. She mentions dates to try to keep herself grounded in reality by communicating only the facts. "Exactly sixty one days ago from this date, at twelve midnight, the Pakistani army took away my son, Rumi." ¹⁷⁴

But she simultaneously realizes how absurd and impossible this is since the experience exceeds her mental capacities. By yielding to time, the mother is forced to come to terms with the loss of her son. The temporal dimension becomes even more poignant considering the fact that the experience is inscribed in the form of a diary. She attempts to restore her state of mind present before the disappearance of Rumi. Although Imam does not evidently deny the reality of circumstances, yet there is a tendency of rescuing or restoring the object of her love through integrating the past in her present. The immediacy of recollection allows her to assimilate the presence of Rumi in the everyday experience. She writes:

Last Wednesday, the Siddhirganj power station was bombed three times in the early hours of the morning. This caused severe damage to the four generators which stopped working. Immediately after the bomb explosion, Dhaka, Narayanganj, Tangi and parts of the suburb were immersed in darkness due to the loss in power supply. A sense of desolation came over me as I heard the news. Rumi and his friends had come from

¹⁷³Jahanara Imam, *Ekattorer Dinguli* (Dhaka: Charulipi Publishers, 1986), 207-208.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., 229.

Melaghar to Dhaka with the plan of bombing the Siddhirganj power station. But they were arrested even before they could execute their plan. Rumi, Bodi and Jewel are lost forever. But to finish their unaccomplished task, there are several Rumis, several Bodis, several Jewels who have taken up arms.¹⁷⁵

What emerges through Imam's writing is the notion of struggle and truth of experience as opposed to the national iconography of ideal motherhood. The struggle to preserve in memory the trace of her son and the truth of her lived experience redefines the unitary image of mothers as sharing a sense of pride and joy at the departure of their sons. She alters everyday language by remembering Rumi as a real entity reinforced through maternal essentialism instead of a mere victim of state politics and war activism. Rumi is resurrected through values of sympathy, affection and relation which are inherent in a mother's imagination.

While official history endorsed sentimentalized beliefs about the loss of motherhood, Imam dismisses the overtly sentimental depictions of sympathy by focussing on the more practical implications of maternal identification.

Today is Eid. We have not made any arrangements to celebrate the festival at our house. No one has bought new clothes. The curtains have not been washed, neither have the cobwebs been cleaned. The table has not been set with the perfume bottle. Sharif and Jami have not even gone to offer their 'Namaz' (prayers). But I woke up in the morning to prepare the 'semyah' (sweet dish). What if one of Rumi's comrades was to come home today? What if some guerrilla soldier, so far removed from his parents and family came seeking shelter at night? I have cooked pulao, korma, kofta, kebab in order to feed them. If they come, I will serve them myself. I have also secretly bought a bottle of perfume to apply on their clothes if they were to come.¹⁷⁶

Imam writes about Rumi not only as recourse to the prolonged grieving but from the selfish attachment of a mother's love. Motherhood is, as if, encoded in the dichotomous cognitive processes which negotiate between a derivative collective identity and the personal agony of loss.

¹⁷⁵Jahanara Imam, *Ekattorer Dinguli* (Dhaka: Charulipi Publishers, 1986), 238.

¹⁷⁶Ibid., 244.

In the context of the Bangladesh Liberation War, 1971, motherhood served as an altar of the nation's birth. Through the sacrifice of their sons, mothers were drawn into the project of nation building. Fundamentally, the mothers who lost their sons in battles were also recognized as 'martyrs' and addressed as 'shahid janani'. The erasure of motherhood then became an imperative to 'martyrdom' on the part of the women. In the hegemonic national ethos, the notion of the bereaved mother constituted a well defined identity, which carried a certain prestige and was presented as a possible source of comfort. Imam is suspicious of such stable identities and perceives the manipulation inherent in the process. Her personal narrative therefore presents an interpretive challenge to the legitimization of 'triumphant' motherhood in terms of the national collective value of sacrifice.

While she performs her motherly duties towards her younger son, Jami, the regular routine of motherhood serves to intensify the nagging apprehensions and horror surrounding the fate of Rumi. It renders the potential of conflict between the interests of motherhood and the nation to the point of a break out. The silence that had been interpreted as consent on the part of the mother erupts into a singular voice which exposes the tacit manipulation and the mechanism of symbolic state compensations following the war. The collective mechanisms of denial and repression and their manifestations in both the national mindset and the spoken and written language are also revealed in the context of the critical moment in history. Imam's narrative primarily marks her liminal position as a listener and a speaker. She listens and records in memory the political and cultural climate of the emerging nation state and speaks of it with candour defying gendered division of roles. Imam makes herself heard as a mother, but over and beyond this she also presents a new understanding of the historical narrative which frames her own testimony. She defines essentially the fluid boundaries of motherhood as opposed to the cultural fixities ascribed to it.

Motherhood becomes a temporal marker in Imam's narrative tracing the sites of experience in war which may only be assumed subjectively.

Although I was regularly visiting the Pagla peer baba, there was a gnawing fear which would control my being at all times. My heart rang out with the cry: Rumi is no longer alive, Altaf is no longer alive, Jewel is no longer alive, Bodi, Bashar, Hafiz are no longer alive, Azad is no longer alive, no, they are no longer alive.

Rumi is no longer alive? At such a tender age- when he was ready to savour the joys and pleasures of life and youth. Did he have to leave us now? From 2nd September, he was supposed to join his classes at Illinois Institute of Technology. Instead of that, where did he disappear on 4th September? I remembered how just a few days ago on 28th August, he stood before this couch in the living room, and told us that even if he died, he would not have any regrets. May be I will not know life in its completeness as you all do, but within this short span, I was tasted the joys-sorrows-pleasures-pains of life.¹⁷⁷

Ekattorer Dinguli viewed from the perspective of collective memory may be read as a ‘spatial’ story since it organizes space and place through the personal recollection of a mother. The experience of the speaker is situated within these spatial and temporal locations and dislocations which shapes memory. The living room and the couch serve as a point of reference allowing Imam to engage in an active search for the past. The moment of loss is conceived in an early memory which records Rumi’s intention to devote his life for the country. The ‘memory-journey’ is marked not through a physical, geographical displacement on the part of the author but a progress through time. Imam attempts to retrace the route, underlining the importance of place in relation to memory. The empty everyday haunts the locales and rooms, as Bloch calls “hollow spaces” (Hohlraum), a cavernous space chock-full with distractions and fleeting impressions. Unable to escape the confined space of the home, the author undertakes a commemorative journey. The inward, temporal form of memory and recollection implies that more important than locating the actual geographical site is the mapping of memory in both the past and present.

The photographs of Rumi help in mapping an inward journey for his mother among the memories and traumas of the past. They ultimately chart an absence from, rather than a presence within, the visible world. The photographs depict a journey in an array of empty spaces, muted colours, flattened surfaces, and recurring figures and objects. The journey is that of a mother who sustains and resurrects the child somewhere between the text and the image. Siegfried Kracauer suggests that the dissolution of memory is prevented by the modern inventions of technology. He compares images that come to the mind in memory and images produced by the camera. The

¹⁷⁷ Jahanara Imam, *Ekattorer Dinguli* (Dhaka: Charulipi Publishers, 1986), 209.

photograph is tied to one contingent moment. But photography shows only the external surface of the person, the outer skin at one moment in time. Kracauer depicts this as the representation of the 'shell', which lacks the 'innerness' of the being.

This is unlike the memory-image, which portrays a concentrated and enhanced image of the person. The image that flashes into memory is a whole image of the person. The memory-image conjures up a condensed version of the person that sums up or summons up his or her totality, even if it is selective. The photograph of Rumi relates to the living memory of the son as well as the distant memory of the martyr who is lost forever. The living memory contributes to the accuracy or likeness of the image or photograph. It seeks to reinforce the meaning and configurations of the person. The photograph finds a niche in living memory. But the image of Rumi is simultaneously appropriated by time, which makes it appear distant and detached from living experience. The estrangement that the photograph delivers provides a dismal impression of loss and a sense of alienation from the human. The photograph fits into a continuum that entails both the present and the past. The impression of time is also mediated by the photograph. There is a realization of the passage of time which cannot be overwritten by the newness or vividness of the colour photograph. This understanding of the passage of time shows how fragile and conditional our lives are. Imam sees in the photograph both the possibility and impossibility of Rumi's return.

The photograph makes the memory of Rumi more composite and full of intimate sense. It finds a subjective resonance in Imam's memory. According to Walter Benjamin, "What the photographs by their sheer accumulation attempt to banish is the recollection of death, which is part and parcel of every memory image."¹⁷⁸ Memory is intimate with death, and the passing of all things and states, until the time death engulfs it too. Imam is fully aware of the reality of death and the human capacity of forgetting. Her attempt to communicate a new vision through the restored negatives may be interpreted as a manner of warding off the inevitable acceptance of Rumi's death.

I went to Harris' to get a negative of Rumi's photo. A year or two back, when they had gone to West Pakistan to visit my sisters, they had this photograph clicked by Harris. I

¹⁷⁸ Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, trans. Rodney Livingstone et al, ed. Michael W. Jennings et al (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 511.

had a copy with myself. A pistol attached to his waist, a round of bullets slung over his shoulder, a cap rested on his head, his hands on his waist, exchanging a few words with his companion: this was Rumi's pose while clicking the photograph. He looked so life like. Yesterday, quite unexpectedly, Harris had called up to say that he had a few negatives of Rumi's photos. I went and got it today. For the past few days, I had been desperately searching for Rumi's photo in all our family albums. In recent times, Rumi had become very reluctant to click photographs. All the photos I found were two or three years old. I collected the negatives from Harris and gave them for printing in a larger dimension.¹⁷⁹

Benjamin initiated a critical dialogue on the relation of memory to the new technologies of vision. In the context of modernity, humans have been remoulded by their technologies. Memory is dependent on the structures and inventions of new technology since they have now assumed the role of archivist. Benjamin supports the manner in which photographs and films have grasped the human mind and influenced our collective imagination. Walter Benjamin testifies to the contextual relevance of photographs and films and the systems of co-relation between photography and memory in his memoirs, *A Berlin Chronicle* (1932) and *Berlin Childhood around 1900* (1938). Image-making as a product of modern technology has been of momentous significance in digitally archiving the forgotten past in the present. Photography is equally a part of the external reality as it is a part of our internal world. The act of reminiscence has been extracted from its dependency on the mind's eye and has now been precisely placed before the physical eye with the help of celluloid partners to memory.

In *A Berlin Chronicle*, Benjamin's reflection on 'temporal removal', which is arguably the mechanism of photography, involves a sense of *déjà vu*. It is as if a "forgotten glove or reticule" is stumbled upon, and it causes a word or gesture to suddenly return from the past. The moment flashes into consciousness through the image and is decoded in the present through the lens of current states of thought and feeling. Benjamin asserts that memory is not simply a recall of events buried in the past. It involves a quest for knowledge or truth about the situation. Benjamin imagines the process of recollection as similar to the process of photography.

¹⁷⁹ Jahanara Imam, *Ekattorer Dinguli* (Dhaka: Charulipi Publishers, 1986), 241.

The camera records much more than the object focussed upon or consciously perceived. The lens absorbs without discrimination or filter and yields much more than what is envisaged. Besides the primary object of observation, our memory deposits fragments of place and time in a manner similar to the operation of a camera. Spaces, textures, patterns, atmospheres, and relationships are therefore assimilated by the mind and belatedly developed into understanding or knowledge which may achieve particular significance in the future when the memory of the event or experience resurfaces. If not the visual, then the smelled, the tasted, or the heard may be remembered. This would lead to an awakening or what Benjamin calls 'déjà vu' in terms of a call from the past. Memories invoked in this manner allow the individual to jump into the scenes of the past or what in cinematic terms may be understood as a 'flashback'.

However, once the framework of interpretation shifts from the personal to the plural, there is a significant change in the modes and phases of remembrance. While personal memory operates as a videotape like replica of the past, it is also suffused with the memory of others. The process of narrativization is influenced not only by the concentrated focus on Rumi but also the conscious and unconscious inclusion of others who contribute to the enduring and piercing quality of the memory. This intervention in much of what is remembered derives not only from within but also without, from sources outside the perimeter of our first-hand experience. These external characters rush into the narrative as if on their own volition. But it is through the agency of the other that the singular memory of the event or person that the author has been seeking all along is intensified. In the course of remembering and writing, Imam is organically connected to these people who are responsible on some level in precipitating the departure of her son. She resists the impulse to dramatize untruthfully in writing and implies only that which was performed in action through memory.

She vividly remembers that fateful night when Rumi was taken by the military for questioning. But the specific memory of the event operates in relation to the others present at that moment, and though unintended, results in rhythmically fusing the central subject with its immediate environment.

At the front door, the sound of heavy hands banging and angry voices yelling could be heard distinctly. The noises grew louder every passing minute. Sharif and I looked at each other. I could not process the sensations this sudden event produced within me. I

was frozen with fear. I was reduced to a puppet with the strings being pulled by an unknown master. Sharif and I went to the balcony. Sharif asked, “Who is it? What do you want?”

We heard a rough voice reply, “Come down and open the door quickly. Why are you delaying?”

Sharif answered, “We took some time to wake up. What do you want so late at night?”

This time, a mild voice could be heard speaking in polite Urdu, “Nothing very important. Please open the door.”

Sharif and I climbed down the stairs. The clock hanging on the wall informed me that it was ten past twelve...Sharif opened the door and unlocked the collapsible iron gate. A very young military officer was standing outside accompanied by other well built soldiers waiting behind him. I asked in a trembling voice, “What can I do for you?”

The officer raised his hand as if to salute me and answered in English, “I am Captain Kayyum. I have come to search your house.”

I asked him timidly, “Why? What is the reason?”

“It’s nothing very important. We are just conducting a routine search. How many people live in your house? Who all are present here now?”

Captain Kayyum looked like he was merely a college student. He was fair, slim, and spoke in a low, gentle voice. The subedar who was accompanying him was taller, well built and middle aged. His Urdu pronunciation revealed that he was a Bihari.¹⁸⁰

Memory is affected by this or that factor, which in turn implies that it remains impossible to separate it from such factors and retain the pure, unsullied memory of her son. Further, Imam orchestrates maternal tensions with memory’s pain so that each mirrors the other’s anguish and ambivalence. The recollection of the moment of danger brings forth unexpected associations reinforcing every instant, every gesture. The damaging shock of experience is underplayed in

¹⁸⁰ Jahanara Imam, *Ekattorer Dinguli* (Dhaka: Charulipi Publishers, 1986), 177.

narrative by the tiniest recollections of people and environment. The physiological exactness of description overcomes the psychological trauma. The stimulus of the traumatic memory becomes visceral.

Bodily details and material objects are remembered and generate chains of rhythmic, sensory and intuitive associations until the circles overlap each other and distract the mind from the object of recollection. Her chivalric transcendence from the ordinary into the role of a protector when she confronts Captain Kayyum soon gives way to the ritualistic struggles of a mother who is faced with the imminent threat of her child being torn apart from her. The mother's desire to protect her child in that moment of danger causes a revival of the primal sensations of motherhood which are first realized at the birth of the child.

The past's true reality continues to emerge through memory, although her intellect fails to process Captain Kayyum's words as information at that point of time. Her mind is crowded with obsessive, confused images and the whole house becomes polarized as the individuals who now infiltrate the space.

Captain Kayyum, his subedar and a few other armed officers entered the house and within minutes they spread to the various parts of the house: a few to the first floor, others to the second floor. With their practised skill, they checked every wardrobe, drawer in our room, they opened the back door and searched the yard, they searched my father-in-law's room with extreme caution, they asked Rumi and everybody else their names and asked them to go downstairs. I was following them everywhere. I quickly asked, "Why? Why should they go down?"

Captain Kayyum said, "Nothing. We will just carry out some routine interrogation." He looked at Sharif and asked him to come down as well. Even I accompanied them downstairs where I saw Rumi, Jami, Hafiz and Massoom standing in the porch.¹⁸¹

The home is a critical space of being and becoming. It is a powerful force that helps maintain feelings of security, belonging and continuity. It also emerges as a space for grounding, constructing and rooting family relations and memory. When Rumi is taken away by the military,

¹⁸¹ Jahanara Imam, *Ekattorer Dinguli* (Dhaka: Charulipi Publishers, 1986), 178.

it marks a second and permanent exile from home. At first, it was the self imposed exile to Melaghar to seek training as a guerrilla and consequently participate in the 'Mukti Juddho' that had led Rumi far from home. His return then was much anticipated and his point of departure not as severe. However, Rumi's arrest by the Pakistani military on the night of 29th August affirms his final departure, driving the son farthest from home and his mother.

Imam's narrative frames the period of waiting as mingled with the fear of her son not being able to reach home, detained, being separated or perhaps tortured by the military for information. She does not for once imagine the possibility of death. She spends the night in alternating states of frenzy and absent mindedness, suffering from a sense of increased agitation and anticipation rather than hopelessness or despair.

For a while I stood in the empty porch in stunned silence. Then I went inside the house and one by one switched on all the lights in the rooms. The main door remained open as I went up to the second floor. I entered my father-in-law's room and saw that he was fast asleep. I came down to the first floor again and stood in the porch. I walked up to the middle of the lane, then returned to the porch, then sat in the balcony for a while. Half an hour passed by, one hour, one and a half hour, yet they did not return. I went in and out continuously.

It was almost dawn. They still hadn't returned. Captain Kayyum had said they would return in half an hour-forty five minutes. I spent nearly five hours in this manner going outside and then coming inside believing his words. They could have taken them away without saying anything. Did Captain Kayyum lie to me then? Before Captain Kayyum left in his jeep, I had taken his phone number. But why had I taken his phone number? Did I unconsciously also realize that they would not be returning so soon?¹⁸²

The physical and symbolic attack on the home space and family deconstructs the notion of safety associated with it. For a woman, it is home-making practises which serve as central strategies of resilience and survival. The invasion of the psycho-social home space may therefore also be interpreted as an assault on the identity of the woman and the preservation of family

¹⁸² Jahanara Imam, *Ekattorer Dinguli* (Dhaka: Charulipi Publishers, 1986), 179.

memory. For Imam, the home appears stripped off any meaning since she no longer perceives her function within a space which is marked by the absence of her sons. In her memory, it was the home which had assumed central importance not only because of her family but due to the fact that Rumi's presence had recreated the home as a radical counter space for liberation and struggle.

There were days and nights that had been spent analyzing political imaginaries and liberation projects. Rumi's vision of independence, his efforts towards the Liberation War had continued to shape the intimacies and everydayness of their home.

Rumi had not shaved for two days. He clenched his hair in a fist and said, "Amma, do you not understand that the discussions between Yahya and Mujib are bound to fail. This is simply an excuse to buy them time. They are not going to give us freedom. We have to claim our Independence through an armed conflict."

I felt a shiver run down my spine, "What are you saying? The Pakistani army has the latest model in weapons. How will we fight against them?"

Rumi replied in a fit of excitement, "Exactly! That is exactly my question. With a black flag of protest flying on top of his white car, Mujib is going back and forth to the President's House every day. There is no progress in their discussions. On one hand, every day planes full of men in white uniform are disembarking here, the ports at Chittagong have docked ships brimming with arms and weapons. On the other hand, our brave Bengali men on the streets of Dhaka are marching towards Banga Bandhu's house with sticks in their hands to show him their respect and then returning home with great satisfaction to a hearty meal of rice and fish and their peaceful sleep. They gather at the local playground with dummy rifles and perform drills with their rifles hung over their shoulders. Are we still living in a fairytale? There must be some limit to such immaturity."¹⁸³

The home, here becomes a place where memory and history is transmitted preserving the continuity of social and national identities. It is a place which promotes ever changing

¹⁸³ Jahanara Imam, *Ekattorer Dinguli* (Dhaka: Charulipi Publishers, 1986), 37.

perspectives and shifts in identity. Rumi's point of departure uproots him from the family and leads Imam to realize the dangerous compliance between the home and the nation. Although, our understanding of home transcends territorial borders and nation states, it is impossible to extricate it from the politics of national struggles. Trauma and dispossession saturates her experience as Rumi is taken away abruptly without any distinguishable reason. For a mother, it leads to a negation of her maternal as well as material identity since the home also loses its material significance in the absence of her son.

By centering her thoughts and hopes of Rumi's return on the home, she raises the importance of the home as a site of remembrance and resistance in the march of memory. The home is a space where we remember who we are and what others mean to us. Rumi's departure from home produces rancour and regret since it reminds her of the past but it also intensifies the feelings of resistance against structures and systems which seek to erase and destroy her memory and identity. The home, then, is a place where, through the act of remembering, Imam discovers the possibility of renewing her political and national commitment despite the loss of her son.

(4.2) Memories of Resistance and the Civil Movement

While the more shameful aspects of the Bangladesh Liberation War- notably, the genocidal intent and the collaboration of 'Razakars' in the mass murder and rape of citizens- was for many years a taboo subject in public discourse as well as in the academy, there are certain areas of critical discussion which have opened up in recent years. This was aided by a series of highly publicized trials for crimes against humanity with the first indictments issued in 2010. The trial of Abul Kalam Azad, a Jamaat-e-Islami functionary notorious for his role in the persecution of resistants and civilians resulted in nation-wide strike called by the Jammat-e-Islami supporters and their student wing, Bangladesh Islami Chhatra Shibir on 4 December, 2012 demanding the release of their leaders on grounds of injustice.

“In just a few months before the opening of the trial, Abul Kalam Azad, who was then identified as ‘Bachhu Razakar’, a close associate of Jamaat-e-Islami Secretary General, Ali Ahsan Mohammad Mujaheed in Faridpur district of Bangladesh, 1971 was indicted on charges of genocide, murder, rape, loot, arson and abduction.”¹⁸⁴

Bangladesh News quoted Sanaul Huq, a member of the investigation committee that they have identified at least 14 people murdered by Azad, three of whom were raped and nine abducted. The investigation also revealed that witnesses had reported Azad of having burnt down at least five houses, looting fifteen and forcing nine people to convert to Islam. Azad who was a popular face on national television and a well recognized political figure was tried in absentia as he had fled the country to seek refuge either in India or Pakistan as it has been suspected. The trial of Abul Kalam Azad constituted a watershed in Bangladeshi collective memory of the post-war period, especially in terms of the efforts of the International Crimes Tribunal (ICT, Bangladesh) and the ‘Gonadalot’ or people’s court which sought to voice the general grievances on a public platform.

Abul Kalam Azad was never tracked down and extradited to Bangladesh. But justice was not eluded in the case of Abdul Quader Mollah, assistant secretary of Jamaat-e-Islami, (later Secretary General) who was sentenced to life time imprisonment on 4 February, 2013 on charges of murder of 344 innocent civilians and the rape of an eleven year old girl. The formal charges filed against him on 18 December, 2011 included the Pallab murder, the murder of pro-liberation poet, Meherunnesa, her mother and two brothers, the Khandoker Abu Taleb killing, the Ghatar Char and Bhawal Khan Bari killings, the Alubdi mass killing (344 people), the rape and murder of Hazrat Ali and family.¹⁸⁵

The Shahbag protests which followed criticizing the leniency of the verdict involved widespread demonstrations demanding capital punishment for Abdul Quader Mollah. The protests were not only centred in Dhaka, members of civil society from other parts of the country

¹⁸⁴Tanim Ahmed, “First War Crimes Verdict Monday,” *Bangladesh News*, January 20, 2013, <https://bdnews24.com/bangladesh/2013/01/20/bachchu-razakar-verdict-monday>

¹⁸⁵Tanim Ahmed, “First War Crimes Verdict Monday,” *Bangladesh News*, January 20, 2013, <https://bdnews24.com/bangladesh/2013/01/20/bachchu-razakar-verdict-monday>

such as Chittagong, Sylhet, Mymensingh, Barisal, Khulna organized a series of demonstrations against the decision of the Supreme Court. The sentence was overturned despite violent counter protests from the Jammāt-e-Islami party and Mollah was awarded a death sentence. His execution was carried out on 12 December, 2013 at Dhaka Central Jail.

The Al-Jazeera news agency reported on 13 December, 2013:

“Fears that the execution of Abdul Quader Mollah, (65) the first person to be put to death for massacres committed during the war were realised on Friday as activists torched homes and businesses belonging to government supporters in a fresh wave of bloodshed ahead of elections next month.”¹⁸⁶

In fact, the Jamaat-e-Islami and their student wing, Islaami Chhatra Shibir, had issued death threats against the protesters, and threatened to use suicide bombers to uproot the protest at Shahbag. The Jammāt-e-Islami organized a nation-wide strike on 24 February with the support of the ruling party, Bangladesh National Party (BNP) which erupted in anger and violence against the Shahbag protesters. The reports of public violence and vandalism no doubt revealed the level of support for Mollah, and the popular attitudes towards the ‘razakars’.

Abdul Quader Mollah was the first accused to be awarded a death sentence by the ICT. The resistance movement in Bangladesh revived painful memories of loss and betrayal. The resistance was not a unified entity in national history but consisted of groups with differing, sometimes hostile agendas. Jahanara Imam has over the years emerged as a national symbol of the resistance bringing the diverse groups of the interior resistance together into a single organization in the form of the Ghatak-Dalal Nirmul Committee (Committee for Eradicating the Killers and Collaborators of ’71). The political divisions and fault lines within the resistance brought forth the repressed memory of the Liberation War which was still not subject to open discussion even in the 1980’s. The emergence of private stories into a collective story of the resistance that receives a legal hearing and public acknowledgement and validation was the greatest contribution of the ICT in Bangladesh.

¹⁸⁶ News Agencies, “Bangladesh execution sparks violent protests,” *Al Jazeera*, December 13, 2013, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/asia/2013/12/bangladesh-execution-sparks-violent-protests-201312135743734649.html>

In her book, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (1963), Hannah Arendt records the trial of Adolf Eichmann, a German-Austrian Nazi SS accused of facilitating the mass deportation of Jews in World War II (particularly during his operations in Hungary) to ghettos and the extermination camp in Auschwitz. The parallel between the two trials despite the differences in time, place and culture may be drawn in terms of the effect that it achieved in the collective memory of those who remembered the persecution. Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer in their work, *The Witness in the Archive: Holocaust Studies/Memory Studies*, critically discuss the aspects of bearing witness to the trial in Arendt's work. They claim:

If the Eichmann trial was revolutionary, a milestone in the history of Holocaust memory and memorialisation, it is because it allowed for a collective story to emerge through individual victim testimonies...the authority, in fact, transcends those victims who were able to testify at the trial; it even transcends those who did not survive to tell their tale. Famously, Gideon Hausner, the prosecutor, opened his address to the Israeli court not on behalf of the state he represented, but of "six million prosecutors": "When I stand before you, judges of Israel, in this court, to accuse Adolf Eichmann, I do not stand alone. Here with me at this moment stand six million prosecutors. But, alas, they cannot rise to level the finger of accusation in the direction of the glass dock and cry out *j'accuse* against the man who sits there...Their blood cries to Heaven, but their voice cannot be heard." If the Nuremberg trial focussed on the war criminals and left out the story of the victims, the Eichmann trial served as a corrective, foregrounding in that courtroom the unwieldy survivor narratives.¹⁸⁷

Similarly, the trials of the ICT emerged as milestones in the history of the Bangladesh resistance movement because despite the confusions, contradictions and misremembering of the witnesses, it assumed a collective voice. The fractures were covered by the collective desire for personal justice and not only the punishment of the accused. The legal impulse of the ICT much like the Eichmann trial was overshadowed by the pre-eminence of personal narratives of trauma and suffering. The people's court redirected focus on common experience and listening to the stories of the victims.

¹⁸⁷ Marianne Hirsch, and Leo Spitzer, "The Witness in the Archive: Holocaust Studies/Memory Studies," in *Memories: Histories, Theories, Debates* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010), 390.

There are several aspects of the resistance movement which must be critically analyzed in the context of Bangladesh. Firstly, the movement was itself reduced to a small but heroic minority before involving the larger civil society. Secondly, the people's resistance could not offer documentary proof of their story and survived on the basis of testimony or witness. It was often dismissed as popular fantasy or fiction. This created a troubling amalgam. Lastly, there was a desire to replace heroic aggrandizement with abjection in post war society. The social tendency to 'deheroize' the Liberation War in later years (particularly the participation of women and ethnic groups) further complicated the popular understanding of the resistance. Ethnic mobilizations in their own local dynamics and historical contingencies had been overlooked. It problematised the cultural dimensions and gender representation of the resistance movement. The subcultures of opposition which were covertly expressed had been denied recognition.

The 'Mukti Bahini' despite its political formation was recognized for its guerrilla operation. Some acts were overtly oppositional, yet unrecognized because they were deliberately hidden from view. Visibility is necessary for the recognition of resistance. The guerrilla resistance was at first not recognized as powerful by the foreign forces primarily because it remained invisible to the authorities. A critical focus on the guerrilla movement was made evident when India, who had not immediately intervened in the war after Pakistan launched Operation Searchlight in March, 1971 started providing military training and support to the Provisional Government of Bangladesh. The emergence of a Bangladesh-India Allied Force, which later came to be known as 'Mitro Bahini' further strengthened the oppositional claim.

Similarly, socio-cultural elements such as religion, language, and territory are remarkably significant in shaping the representational politics of the resistance movement. The question of recognition has been most contentious in this matter. Though unrecognized, these acts of resistance by minority groups were able to make a difference in imperceptible ways. The massacres at Jathibhanga, Chuknagar and Shankharipara on minority Hindus directed the resistance towards a militant course and the ethnic violence resulted in the cross cutting of ethnic, religious divisions creating an alliance between revolutionaries and minority groups. The resistance movement made ethnic categories which had remained peripheral, central to the process of contestation. But these ethnic conflicts were buried within the structuralist perspective that defined the writing of an official liberation history in the post war years. Also within the

broader power struggles in society during 1971, the interlocking relation between ethnicity and nationalism and complex ethno politics which lay beyond the formal political arena was rendered invisible to the larger public. The involvement and efforts of the 'Mukti Bahini', their resource mobilization and reach was also not easily understood by the ordinary citizen due to the lack of a suitable, credible, legitimate vehicle of news transmission.

The curiosity to grasp the strategic networks of resistance of the Mukti Bahini is evoked in Imam's narrative when she recollects an encounter with her carpenter, Chaitanya and his nephew, Niranjan:

I used to frequently sit out in the porch to watch them work. Niranjan would help his uncle and constantly keep up with his chatter. He knew all the news from the Gulshan, Banani, and Badda area.

Today he said, "Didi Ma, did you hear? Munem Khan's body has been taken out of the grave? I was shocked, "No I haven't heard! Who did that? Why?"

Niranjan spoke with a sense of confidence, "The Muktijoddhas took it out. They will not let the corpse of such a traitor lie in this country."

Chaitanya scolded him by saying, "You speak so uselessly Niranjan!" Why do you speak so much?"

I said, "Aha! Let him speak. I want to hear him. Chaitanya you don't need to fear talking freely before me. Even my son was a 'mukti'. Niranjan, how do you know so much about the 'muktis'?"

Niranjan got excited and said, "Why wouldn't I know? Do you know how many 'muktis' are there in our area? They are involved in action and haven't I seen them with guns in their hands?" Chaitanya said helplessly, "This boy will bring my ruin. He speaks so much."

"You have nothing fear, Niranjan. There will be no harm in telling me. He doesn't go out anywhere. So Niranjan, tell me about the 'muktis' in your village."

“There are no ‘muktis’ in our village but in villages around us. We get to hear their stories. Many of them come from Agartala after receiving training. A boy from our area only killed Munem Khan. I know everything.”

I could not contain my curiosity, “Are you sure? A boy from your area! Do you really know who killed him? Were those boys from the ‘Mukti Bahini’?”

“Yes, they came after receiving training from Agartala. They have guns in their hands and also grenades. They look exactly like pineapples.”...

“Niranjan, have you heard of a place called Melaghar? It is near Agartala.”

“Yes I have heard of it. These boys have come from Melaghar.”

Tell me how did they kill Monem Khan.¹⁸⁸

The second wave of public resistance in the 1990’s not only involved a search for historical truth but also political or legal justice for those who had suffered most brutally the atrocities of the genocide. In the post war period, the intellectual mood in Bangladesh was largely anti-establishment. A fierce polemic was being waged, as politically liberal intellectuals were divided over their opinion whether the newly elected Bangladesh National Party (BNP) government was as great an evil as the Pakistani military junta prior to them. With the Ziaur Rahman led government revoking the ban on the Jamaat-e-Islami party, who worked in active collaboration with the Pakistani army in 1978, the faith of the intellectual community in Bangladesh was considerably shaken. Doubts concerning the political sympathies of the new government and the idea of social reconstruction marked the areas of shadow. The recall of Ghulam Azam, the exiled chief of Jammat-e-Islami to Bangladesh in July, 1978 breached the standard of ethics as well as political promise of the new government.

The resistance movement thus originated in this particularly painful and dire moment in post war society, with intellectuals and minority groups questioning the positivist agenda of the national party. The rationalization provided by the government, presenting plausible motives or

¹⁸⁸ Jahanara Imam, *Ekattorer Dinguli* (Dhaka: Charulipi Publishers, 1986), 250.

explanations for actions whose motives remained hidden was initially invited by civil groups without knowing fully their correspondence with facts. The exact degree of consciousness among the civil society may be hard to determine but the tendency to smooth over the telling of the history of genocide was evident in the political rhetoric and gave rise to doubt and widespread dissent. The government in a sense felt authorized to arrange certain facts without consciously intending to deceive. But the outcry of the press and civil groups made it clear that the government preferred insinuation over explicit statement, fabrication over truth.

The growth of individual political consciousness may be traced in the context of Imam's *Ekattorer Dinguli* as a dynamic process with was rooted in the present circumstances and interests. The author's memory is initially not troubled by the ambiguity of reported news since she is unaware of the real inconsistencies. The numerous contradictory accounts foster confusion and the location of the individual largely confined within the space of the household prevent the clarification of facts. Indeed this was the condition of thousands of women who being restricted within the quarters of the house lacked a clear understanding of political events and national developments. They remembered the war from the perspective of their experiences which were loosely drawn on the framework of political history. The resistance did not have a distinctly political resonance until much later when the truth emerged through historical objectivity and collective social responsibility. The minute examination of 'historical' details requires a larger context and this hypercritical approach is not evident in the narrative, which mainly progresses through conjectures and suggestions.

This is evident in Imam writing of the immediate changes she perceives in the wake of Independence, December, 1971:

Since afternoon there was a palpable sense of excitement and restlessness in the city. The Pakistani army was apparently going to surrender in the evening. Since morning, Kalim, Hooda, Lalu, whoever came home had the same thing to say. Several groups of people flouted the curfew and took to the streets shouting slogans of 'Joy Bangla'. The Pak army and the Biharis were fleeing the city. On their way, they were randomly shooting civilians, wounding and killing several Bengalis. Manjur came with his two daughters. He had the flag of independent Bangladesh at the back of his car. Even he said the same thing. Badshah came and reported that on Elephant Road, the owner of Aziz Motors,

Khan had shot down several innocent civilians while fleeing in his Jeep. While leaving Manjur gave me the flag and said, “If they surrender today, we will hoist the flag tomorrow morning.”¹⁸⁹

Ekattorer Dinguli marks the difficult relationship between historicizing and memorializing a political event. Personal testimonies have perhaps always been distinguished by this primary confrontation between a historian and a memoirist. The process of memorializing a national movement often lacks a definite pattern although there is a tendency of standardizing and homogenizing the experiences for the purpose of self coherence. The memoirist may share the larger national, socio-political aspirations- the pursuit of autonomy, unity and common identity but this narrow focus may lead to incorrect assumptions about the politics of nationalism, gender, class, economic interests, ethnic violence and institutional loyalties which are deeply imbedded in the independence movement. In the context of ‘Ekattorer Dinguli’, Imam often voices popular sentiment than historical fact which is emotional, partisan and tradition-bound, revealing more about self perception than convincingly reiterating historical events.

Her memory of resistance establishes the serious national struggle and communal violence against Bengalis but blurs the many sources and expressions of conflict in terms of minority representation, regionalism, divided participation and economic changes. History is an intrinsic part of the state building process and it is used as a tool of cohesion which is constructive, legitimate, and stabilizing. Memories of resistance therefore serve essentially as counter narratives which must review the more complicated and less heroic path. They must arguably re-examine the wide complex of political, economic and power relationships in close proximity to national history in order to challenge effectively and arrive at a certain sense of universal legitimacy.

Ekattorer Dinguli may not include all aspects or voices of mass resistance but it opens up a political space for recognition and representation of the identities and agendas of a class of intellectuals who were slowly being drawn into the political dynamics and who would eventually influence the process of seeking redressal through active resistance to state ideology and policy. Jahanara Imam’s memoir traces a significant institutional and structural readjustment on the part

¹⁸⁹ Jahanara Imam, *Ekattorer Dinguli* (Dhaka: Charulipi Publishers, 1986), 268.

of the author as she undergoes her private experiences of success and failure as a mother to reach an intellectual understanding of the larger political distortion, corruption and misrepresentation at play on the national level.

She writes about the so-called ‘democratic’ regime being imposed by the government:

For the past few days, the newspapers are filled with reports of the central and state legislative council re-elections. The number of candidates who have filed their papers from different constituencies, for different seats is being elaborately written about every day. Some of them are being elected without any opposition. Fakir said, “Perhaps all the rest will be elected too, but do they know what awaits them in the future?” Sharif knitted his eyebrows and asked, “What?” He answered, “*Kaffan* (shroud), *Loban* (frankincense) and a fifty rupee note.”...

“Nowadays, the Muktijoddhas have turned rogue. They have sent a kaffan, a packet of loban, and a ten rupee note to the Chairman of the Peace Committee, Chairman of the Union Council and its members with a letter stating, ‘Use this ten rupee note and eat whatever you please. Your days are numbered.’

I replied, “Yet, I didn’t expect so many Bengalis to file their nomination papers.”

Fakir said, “Why didn’t you expect it, Bhabhi? We can see for ourselves that all Bengalis certainly do not love their country. You must remember how Rumi’s friend, Bodi was the first to be apprehended by the army while he was at a close friend’s house one afternoon. There is no doubt that Bodi’s friend was an agent of the Pakistanis. It was that afternoon when Bodi was betrayed by his Bengali friend that has resulted in such a catastrophe for us today. Similarly, plenty of such unworthy Bengali men, who have not managed to do anything for themselves so long, are taking advantage of the present situation to become members of the Assembly.¹⁹⁰

In the testimony of Jahanara Imam, there is a distinct transition which may be identified from the presence of resistance in the private sphere (as evident in *Ekattorer Dinguli*) to its symbolic

¹⁹⁰ Jahanara Imam, *Ekattorer Dinguli* (Dhaka: Charulipi Publishers, 1986), 270.

representation in the political arena (when she joined the people's movement to seek justice for war crimes with the establishment of the 'gono adalat' or people's court in 1991). However, the transition from personal recognition to public resistance is fraught with complexity and contains a radical potential since the intellectual enters into and demonstrates her agency in a political space. There is a transference of power from the private to the political field of representation which occurs but the emergence of active resistance is to be found in the earliest act of recognition: recognizing the distorted, manipulated reality of political circumstances.

The mobilization of social forces in the collective mass movement which took place in Bangladesh in the 1990's not only brought forth the rupture or tensions in the relationship between the state and civil society but also uncovered the specific instances from ordinary social and political daily life which had led to the involvement of Bengali intellectuals and members of the civil society in this movement. Imam's role in the movement projects the specific position of the intellectual within the democratic processes, acting as a bridge between civil society and state in order to represent new ideas, political demands and legal claims which had remained unfulfilled since Independence. Emerging as a social actor, her personal resistance was magnified on a political platform gaining prominence especially after the organization of the Ghatak-Dalal Nirmul Committee '71.

With respect to Jahanara Imam's memoir, it is interesting therefore to trace the trajectory or path which led to the emergence of the personal into the political and which was significantly influenced by her inter personal relationships, local institutional settings, and political attitudes. 'Ekattorer Dinguli' manifests a shrinking of political space, where the individual attempts to understand and articulate the centralized political struggle within the domestic sphere. Her act of private resistance is decentralized since the individual is not a political actor. It is weakened by the individual's seclusion from the collective and the absence of a proactive offensive wave of mass support. The resistance which finds expression in Imam's memoir is therefore largely reactive and defensive.

There is evidently a sense of disempowerment which stems from systematic subordination and exposure to horrific atrocities reflected in Imam's narrative of resistance.

...There was another horrifying incident which took place. Taking a statement entails that the army officer would listen to the testimony of the prisoner, would ask him questions and record his answers on a piece of paper. In the process of taking this 'statement', a certain degree of torture was inflicted upon the prisoner but in the past few days this torture had increased beyond measure. The officer would ask the prisoner a question and if the answer was unsatisfactory, he would immediately be beaten up with a stick, kicked and hit with the butt of the rifle. If the officer became impatient with the prisoner or frustrated with his efforts of extracting the right answers, he would pause for a while and then the Pathan soldiers would continue with the process. They would hook the prisoner to the wall and then with thick ropes he would be whipped from both ends. Sometimes they would bend the body of the prisoner till his arms could be bound to the ankles and almost assume the shape of a boat. The prisoner would hardly be able to breathe let alone cry out in agony. In extreme situations, the prisoner would be hung by his feet from the ceiling fan and the blades would be rotated at the highest speed till the man lost consciousness, with his face streaming with blood.

In the midst of this torture, it would take till twelve or one at night to take down the prisoner's 'statement'. At one thirty, Sharif and three others were brought to the room of the colonel at M.P.A hostel, who gave them permission to leave. Sharif asked about Rumi and the officer informed him that he would be released after a day. They were still not done with taking his statement. The colonel had said that Rumi would return after a day. Would you believe his words?¹⁹¹

When a foreign power invades the country, it threatens the various levels of autonomy and integrity: personal and collective within it. Family, extended family, local communities are drawn into a larger national consciousness but the internal resistance which is transmitted within the traditional family networks stems from personal grievances and injuries. There is a sharp distinction which may be noted between the external political resistance (represented by the Muktiyuddho) continuing to struggle for an independent social and political organization within

¹⁹¹ Jahanara Imam, *Ekattorer Dinguli* (Dhaka: Charulipi Publishers, 1986), 270.

Bangladesh and the internal resistance which is projected by minority communities, family institutions and the individual battling the crisis of oppression, violence and death.

The attack on the political and social autonomy of a people means that even institutional relationships become highly personalized. Although there was a close co-relation between the external and the internal resistance, the legitimacy and nationalist credential of the external political resistance was naturally better recognized and more far reaching than the individual voices of dissent and opposition that were considered unimportant or altogether subdued due to the tensions of war and the pressure of political factors. Sharif and Fakir despite their marginal roles engage with the politics of leadership and democracy in their conversation. Their voices echo the increasing schism between the individual and institutional structures as well as the loss of faith in the interim government.

The severity of Rumi's departure develops a sense of disempowerment yet it creates a critical consciousness and loyalty to the resistance movement in general. The personal loss becomes a conduit through which a shared resistance emerges within the family and this strengthens the relative power position of the individual within the internal resistance movement. Consequently, in the years following Independence, (1990's) these withdrawn positions would acquire visibility and determination through the collective efforts of civil society in launching an open critique of the offences of the Pakistani army and the conflicting interests of the elected government in sheltering collaborators of the genocide.

In *Ekattorer Dinguli*, these subordinated identities, agendas and demands find expression despite the obstacles preventing their representation in the political arena. Resistance brings together collectively members of the working class and the elite. The trajectory is influenced by local institutional settings and inter-personal relations. It is then linked to the larger social movement and the material claims of individual groups. The division of labour in Bangladesh was greatly shaped by migration and urbanization patterns. In the period before Independence, when Bangladesh (East Pakistan) was chiefly viewed as a territorial extension of the Islamic republic of Pakistan rather than an independent federal state, industry, taxation and revenue collection were centralized in the hands of the ruling government in West Pakistan. In fact the demands for separate fiscal and monetary policies and greater autonomy in implementing its own industrial law and receiving taxation benefits were vital aspects of Awami League leader, Sheikh

Mujibur Rahman's six point movement in Lahore in 1966. Therefore, due to lack of markets, infrastructure and the high dispersion of the population, rural industrial activities and productivity of labour was very limited.

Within the social context, there is however a difficulty in articulating the concerns of the working class since it requires a new alignment of thought and an understanding of their exclusive concerns apart from the centralized struggle for liberation. Further the majority-minority divide in Bangladesh was also intersected by the differences in religion and ethnicity. Although Bangladesh is commonly perceived as being ethnically homogenous, a significant percentage of population consists of Hindus. Tensions between the Hindus and Muslims (the national majority) have dominated discussions in the region as a result of historical as well as contemporary incidents between the two groups. Coiled within this tensed relation between the Muslims and Hindus, there was a growing rise of ethno-religious consciousness among the Hindu minority in Bangladesh which was brutally crushed by the events of 1971.

Imam's *Ekattorer Dinguli* involves the concerns of the rural labourer and the issue of religious marginalization despite being written by an elite intellectual.

Today morning, suddenly, Chaitanya appeared at our house. He was a carpenter by profession and we had known him since a long time. He was a very honest and hard working man. That is the reason whenever my friends or relatives needed a carpenter, I would recommend Chaitanya without any hesitation. Perhaps because he was too honest and simple minded, he could not get very far in life. When in need, he would frequently visit and request us to put him to work somewhere. We were all excited to see him now and asked him how he was, where he had been so long, why he had not gone to India.

Chaitanya had not been able to leave his ancestral home and leave for India. Besides, near his village in Badda, there had not been any direct instances of military aggression. Somehow he had managed to stay under cover and save his life. But there was no work. He had depended on his savings for the first few days, but now on the brink of starvation, he mustered up the courage to leave his home and come in search of work. I said, "Very good. There is a lot of work for you at home."...

Chaitanya had brought his nephew, Niranjan with him. Previously, Chaitanya would always go to the market and buy wood as he thought was necessary. But now he said, “I’m afraid to go to the shop. Please could ‘Saheb’ buy the wood this time?”

Chaitanya would work the whole day, in the afternoon they would eat sugar and bread and in the evening they would go to the market and then cook their own food. This time Chaitanya requested if our old servant could go to the market for them. They were afraid to go out. I told them there was no need for them to cook. They could eat with us. “You will not lose your caste if you eat food cooked by our hands I hope?”

Chaitanya laughed out of embarrassment and said, “Amma, what are you saying? Here we are fighting for our lives...”

They work in the porch in front of our house. At mid-day and then at night, our old servant took rice-vegetable-fish to their room. They never go out.¹⁹²

The past influences the particular attitudes towards a religious group or community. However, the cross cultural interchange of collective memory becomes significant at the time of conflict since it creates a context of shared social practises rather than distinctive or separate mental representations. Culturally or religiously specific concepts of identity are altered as a collective framework of thinking and remembering emerges. Apart from the collective forms of resistance, the more individual and imperceptible acts of resistance among the people may be traced in the border crossing which Chaitanya and many others had taken up during the Liberation War of 1971. It is difficult to conceive of transit migration and the daily practises of border crossing as resistance in the larger context of the Liberation War and the long period of civil movement after. However, the conception of the new shape and function of the border becomes critical while analyzing the driving impulse of the Liberation War since the re-bordering measures in Bangladesh and policies of territorial and cultural autonomy become inextricably linked. The border then emerges as a site of constant tension, conflict, and contestation.

The motives and consequences of border crossing are far more complex than the simple conceptualization of migration as historically and structurally determined acts of ‘escape’. The

¹⁹² Jahanara Imam, *Ekattorer Dinguli* (Dhaka: Charulipi Publishers, 1986), 250.

agency and political subjectivity of the migrant cannot be erased from the picture. The act of migration contests the power relations between the individual and the state although the overall situation remains unchanged as the individuals and institutions retain their former position. It serves as an act of resistance but is limited to the extent that it enables people to survive without really challenging the circumstances that make survival so hard. Migration movements are thus inherently political, social and transformative practices. Official records or state sponsored literature fail to identify with this difficult space for resistance since it seeks to understand most actions as political resistance in a broad milieu of power. Imam's narrative reconciles these conflicting views on resistance by proposing that although minor in its effect, these range of activities that are not overtly political in their resistance, nonetheless, refuse to abide by the binary framing of state territorial and identity categories and therefore may be regarded as acts of resistance.

When Chaitanya decides to migrate to India he takes on a different social role which transcends the construct of his class and religion. As a Hindu, the will to flee is stronger in him than the other. The migration would not only offer him asylum but act as a massive transformation regime by categorizing him as part of the religious, ethnic 'majority' across the border in Bengal. His decision to migrate therefore engages both the objectifying mode as a resistance to foreign sovereignty in Bangladesh as well as the fully subjective perspective of resistance to a cultural hegemony. This capacity to be flexible and to be able to tactically adapt to the demands of a new homeland is however complicated by Chaitanya's attachment to his ancestral home in Bangladesh which forces him to remain behind despite the perceived and obvious threats. His ancestral home justifies his claim to authority over the territory and further intensifies the difference between the two places.

This idea of defined separate cultural identities emerges through a distinction between a Bangladeshi and a Bengali, which has been explained by several critics and scholars of nationalism, most notably Khondker Abdul Hamid who provided a theoretical basis for Bangladeshi nationalism in a seminar organized by the Bangla Academy in 1976 on the occasion of the National Language Day (21 February). Hamid developed on General Ziaur Rahman's view of nationalism, which Rahman had himself defined in his 1978 speech on "The Problem of National Identity in Bangladesh":

Bangladeshi nationalism means we are Bangladeshi. We have a different history. Our country has been born through a different process. Our traditions and culture are different. Our language is different, we are moulding it in our own way- we are modernizing it. We have different prose and poetry, we have different arts and thoughts. Our geographical position is different, our rivers and soils are different. Our people are different...Today a consciousness has grown among our people, which is different from that of the people of our neighbouring country.¹⁹³

Chaitanya's decision to stay in Bangladesh solidifies these distinctions and cultural identifications and in itself may be interpreted as a mark of potential resistance.

To expand the framework of dynamic socio-political spaces and resistance narratives, 'Ekattorer Dinguli', reveals an intellectual orientation within a known, familiar environment. The term 'intellectual' may often be confusingly applied to Jahanara Imam in the context of her work. But 'Ekattorer Dinguli' remains an intensely personal narration of the author's everyday experience during the period of the Liberation War, 1971. There are no pretences of an elitist intellectual position since she limits her role to that of a spectator studying the political events in Bangladesh instead of participating in them. She remains aloof from political activity and the internal resistance is framed in the context of a mother's relationship with her son rather than any narrowly defined nationalist agenda or self-interest.

The critical aspects of the micro-issues related to the resistance movement paradoxically remain unknown to her despite the privileges of social class and consciousness since Imam's diary reveals her personal and ethical dilemmas as absolute values as opposed to political prerogatives. She narrates an episode with her friend, Kitty:

I fell in deep trouble with Kitty. It is because of her that at this old age I have to sift through books on general knowledge to collect information. Despite seeing so many meetings, protests being organized, she just could not accept that the grievances of the public in East Pakistan were fair and just, and that their desire for independence was justified. Kitty said, "You people simply claim that you are deprived, that West Pakistan

¹⁹³ Tazeen Murshid, "State, Nation, Identity: The Quest for Legitimacy in Bangladesh," in *The Post Colonial States of South Asia: Democracy, Identity, Development and Security*, ed. Amita Shastri and A. Jeyaratnam Wilson (Richmond: Curzon Press, 2000), 165-166.

is exploiting you by filling up their own stomach with your money. But where are the facts to support this accusation? Where are the figures? You must provide statistics to account for the areas where you claim you are being deprived or exploited.

Now listen to her! Have I memorized the facts and figures? But I couldn't tell Kitty that I did not know and ask her to find out by reading the newspapers or books on her own. So I sat down with the financial reports and records of the last 24 years to search for the proof she wanted. I will calculate the last penny spent and show Kitty: rice, flour, salt, paper, gold all the things that West Pakistan has taken from us and sucked our resources dry. I was searching for Sheikh's election poster, "Why is golden Bengal now a graveyard?" If I manage to show that to Kitty, I will be able to meet my purpose to a great extent. The paper has calculated every penny that has been taken from us but if only someone had a copy of it. ¹⁹⁴

The role and orientation of the intellectual is a dynamic one. This episode reveals how political efficacy can be achieved not only through active involvement but may be reflected in this constant process of looking for and finding one's own usefulness in a certain time and place. The intellectual capacity to think, speak and lead herself develops within the context of everyday experiences and not through the claim of legitimate theoretical knowledge.

Michel Foucault attempted to broaden the concept of the intellectual beyond its traditional meaning in the context of the post-1968 mobilizations. The transition of the post war society from an era of conflict created a space for a new kind of intellectual to grow, particularly teachers, researchers, planners, doctors, prison supervisors. They were engaged in a wide variety of institutional sites where power was used to educate or discipline different sections of the population such as in schools, laboratories, hospitals, prisons. These changes reflected a departure from traditional modes of thinking and intellectual work. The growing importance of practical knowledge was therefore a direct result of the change in structural systems. The application of useful, practical knowledge became instrumental in developing an understanding of governing practices and institutional settings. Thus, the position of the intellectual gradually shifted from the realm of abstract thought and the pursuit of absolute truth to the practical reality

¹⁹⁴ Jahanara Imam, *Ekattorer Dinguli* (Dhaka: Charulipi Publishers, 1986), 278.

of the institutions and people they were administering. Their patterns of thought and interest often collided with that of the people they were in contact with such as students, patients, assistants, workers. Eventually, intellectuals found themselves drawn into the concerns of the mass population and participating in the criticism of specific modalities of power along with the repressed people.

Due to their proximity, the values, norms and ethics of the intellectual class became functionally involved in the critique and resistance of dominant power structures and government institutions, speaking 'with' the mass population rather than 'for' the people. The intellectual therefore largely shed their elitist orientation which aligned them with the state, and secured entry into social movements of resistance and struggle as a result of their engagement with the repressed people. Foucault acknowledges that the workers and other oppressed groups know best how to represent their interests and their struggles. However, the intellectual assumes a supportive role, using their specialized knowledge to contribute to the social movement.

In *Ekattorer Dinguli*, Imam represents her experiences as an intellectual as well as a member of a marginalized group. There is a sense of co-relation which evolves between the two ambivalent positions as she allies herself with the struggles of the ordinary mother, the wife, and the civilian. The intellectual critique of existing institutional structures emerges through the assembly of these various minority positions. It would be fallacious to consider that in her conversation with Kitty, she appropriates the task of an intellectual fully capable of democratic deliberations or invested with the power of historical change. However, she does not seek to establish a singular truth but serves to present a partial resistance to a localized power discourse. It was only later, with the establishment of the 'gonoadalat' or people's court in 1992, that Imam's resistance as an intellectual assumes a prominent, strategic role in the larger historical context.

The centrality of the intellectual resistance in Bangladesh in the years prior to the Liberation War, 1971 is elaborated by Imam in *Ekattorer Dinguli*:

In support of the rising national sentiment in Bengal, the poets and writers organized an association, 'Writer's Committee'. Chairperson: Hasan Hafizur Rahman. Members: Sikandar Abu Zafar, Ahmed Sharif, Shauqut Osman, Shamsur Rahman, Badruddin Omar,

Ranesh Dasgupta, Sayeed Atikullah, Borhanuddin Khan Jahangir, Roknujaman Khan, Abdul Gaffar Choudhury, Sufiya Kamal, Zahir Rayhan, Abdul Ghani Hazari and many others. The committee was formed a few days back. Today they have called for an important meeting at 5 o'clock in the evening at the Bangla Academy. Ahmed Sharif Sir will be presiding over the meeting. Ranesh Dasgupta, Alauddin Al-Azad, Borhanuddin Khan Jahangir, Hasan Hafizur Rahman, Rabeya Khatun, Ahmed Chaudhary, and a few others gave motivational speeches on the role of poets and writers in the resistance movement.

I was neither a writer, nor a speaker, so I sat at the back and closely listened to the speeches, feeling aroused by their inspiring words. After the meeting, they had organized a march towards the Shahid Minar...The intellectuals were not far behind in this movement. From the beginning of March, the intellectuals of our country have been actively participating in the non-cooperation movement in Bangladesh by creating awareness among the masses through the radio, television, films, music conferences and through their protest marches. Now they have formed a committee by including representatives from each field to voice their grievances.¹⁹⁵

All contemporary resistance movements consist in part of intellectuals. But in *Ekattorer Dinguli*, Imam does not perceive of herself as an intellectual specifically crafting such representations and articulating public concerns, but as an individual. She claims that she was 'neither a writer, nor a speaker', so she does not speak for the repressed but speaks with them. Though it may be argued that acts of individual resistance have an extremely weak connection to any coherent ideological perspective or collective practices of social support yet Imam's narrative reveals the multiple possibilities of escalating the complexities of power relation and domination to a wider form of resistance through acts performed by isolated individuals and commonalities linking them together in the mind of the narrator. These conceptualizations and understanding of forms of resistance lead the individual to examine the dynamics that support or hinder collective representations and the socially transformative potential of individual intellectual positions.

¹⁹⁵ Jahanara Imam, *Ekattorer Dinguli* (Dhaka: Charulipi Publishers, 1986), 278.

Imam turns her diary into a space for self expression, a source of record and a careful hobby and therefore does not display an awareness of a potential audience which was due to her later in her extraordinary life as a social activist.

As a part of the resistance movement following the war in 1992, Imam argued that women needed equal access to the new political space since the home which had been the most fundamental site of security had been ruptured and women had evolved from natural peace keepers of the household to necessary agents of political and social reorganization. Traditional activism which was aimed at achieving the social goal of a good and peaceful world would no longer suffice since it was overshadowed by the concern for justice. Small groups played an important role in the resistance movement and represented a transitional protest from individuals to small group protest, including protest by mothers whose sons had been killed or presumed dead in the war, labour, journalists, students and teachers. With the public invited to physically appear and express their grievances, there was a broader representation of different groups and served as a broader challenge to the apathy of the government. It also drew an international audience through the involvement of international organizations advocating for criminal trials.

The expansion of the resistance to include members of the middle class, the 'bhodroluk' was further evidence to the growth of a culture of resistance. Not only was the middle class overcoming the concerns of social stigma and emerging into the public space, they were starting to map out other strategies for expansion of rights. The participation of the middle classes enhanced the hegemonic appeal of the resistance. Structural changes and political opportunities were impacting the local contexts of civil society. The BNP Bangladesh National Party which came into power in February 1991 saw a momentous change in the political space with Khaleda Zia sworn in as the first female prime minister of Bangladesh on 20, March, 1991. The parliamentary system was effectively restored by the BNP government recognizing the democratic force of the people and leading to the creation of a sense of collective responsibility. However, the BNP (founded by Khaleda Zia's husband, President Ziaur Rahman) was accused of providing political immunity to the leaders of the Jamaat-e-Islami, who had collaborated with the Pakistani army.

Imam's involvement in the 1992 resistance movement earned her the recognition of a traitor as she was charged with treason by the BNP (later removed after her death in 1996). The resistance

movement therefore brought out multi-institutional political perspectives that questioned the visibility of the activist and the personal goals which inspired them to enter the political arena. However, these charges served to strengthen the social movement's positioning as opposed to the rival claims and further build the prestige of the social activist within the socio-political context.

Nayanika Mookherjee writes in her article, "Denunciatory Practices and the Constitutive Role of Collaboration in the Bangladesh War":

The denunciatory practices in the Gono Adalat brought together a large number of citizens with the aim of directing attention to the acts of collaboration by the Razakars. More widely, the aim of the Gono Adalat was to create a political community among the younger generation. It provided a theatrical space for private pain to move into the public realm. A staged, performative denunciation, where Gholam Azam was sentenced to death in absentia, these enactments ensured the continuation of the environment of death. The posters, which could be found all over Dhaka to advertise the event, served to provide a visual, preview of the process of denunciation. The Gono Adalat pronounced a public verdict and punishment of collaborators for their collaboration in 1971. Through these practices, the left-liberal activists simultaneously sought to appeal to an imagined court of public opinion and to mobilize the public. At the same time, this public denunciation was directed to the BNP government and the state that is seen to be attempting to protect the collaborators. The local authorities sought to disrupt the event by disconnecting the electricity in order to disable the use of microphones for the huge gathering. This act itself generated an added fervour to the event, as Shazzad, a Dhaka University student said to me: "We could not hear what was being said and could only see from a distance. But we knew we had to be there precisely because we could not see or hear clearly."¹⁹⁶

The tradition of resistance was more symbolic than physical and its values triumphed in mass nationalism rather than those of the elite welfare associations and proto-nationalist parties. The conflicted agents of the resistance movement, sympathetic to the methods and goals of the

¹⁹⁶ Nayanika Mookherjee, "Denunciatory Practices and the Constitutive Role of Collaboration in the Bangladesh War," in *Traitors: Suspicion, Intimacy and the Ethics of Statebuilding* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 2010), 58-59.

resistance received diminished institutional support. However, in these campaigns targeted towards the state and the ‘razakars’ it was sheltering, the loosely linked agents of resistance came together to create their own system of legal structures, including courts, elected officials and regulatory agencies. The ‘Gono Adalat’ (people’s court) engaged in a range of legal pressure tactics and included direct action protests by the people to achieve the goals of the resistance movement. Instead of arising from innate political subjectivities, the post war resistance movement in Bangladesh created new subjective political positions.

It was not simply a dichotomy between power and non-power, political and non-political that was bridged by the people’s resistance but it led to an understanding of local power relations and the interactions between different political agencies. The ‘Gono Adalat’ was primarily responsible for the exposure of political violence and transformation of the terms of debate on past abuses. The public sentiment favoured the movement as a necessary step towards restoring justice and human rights in a democracy but the withdrawn muteness of those who decided to stay on the sidelines complicated the overarching view of the resistance as encompassing the entire community. The silence and acts of muteness were perceived as standing in opposition to an obsession with confession, spoken memories and public forms of catharsis. The resistance may therefore be understood as a complex and context-specific construction.

The moral protest forged new and meaningful ways for people to unite. Certainly the success of the ‘Gono Adalat’ depended on public confessions and testimony as an expression of mass support. But the possible moral legitimacy of some of the victims’ silence could not be denied as an inherent part of the resistance movement. It brings to attention the sources of various kinds of more or less legitimate resistance which may be practised by a variety of actors, motivated by different goals and directed at many issues. The participation of the younger generation was momentous as Nayanika Mookherjee notes. These festive mobilizations and nonviolent direct action targeted at pacifist peace organisations and political manipulation wished to challenge the myth that there was no evidence of intended violence on the part of the Pakistani forces. Further, the involvement of ‘razakars’ in the political reorganisation of the country and the indiscriminate criminalization of activists were issues of contention leading hundreds of students into protest pits: the streets and public spaces for rallies and marches.

Arup Kumar Sen writes of the Shahbag protests which followed the acquittal of Abdul Quader Mollah in his article, “Martyr Mother’s Inheritor” for the *Economic and Political Weekly*:

There are different threads in the Shahbag protests. The uniqueness of the movement lies in the fact that it was initiated by young bloggers. The protesters derived their inspiration from the memory of *Shaheed Janani* (Mother of Martyrs), as the Bangladeshi writer and political activist Jahanara Imam was called.¹⁹⁷

Activist bloggers of the Bangladesh Online Activist Network (BOAN) helped to stage a mass protest where thousands of young people gathered at the Shahbag Mor (intersection) in Dhaka demanding justice for the war crimes committed by the Pakistani forces and their local allies, the ‘razakars’ against Bengalis during the Liberation War of 1971. Their immediate concern was the acquittal of Abdul Quader Mollah as outlined earlier. Dr. Imran H. Sarkar, a physician by profession established the Bangladesh Online Activist Network (BOAN) which quickly became a coalition of progressives, intellectuals, students, citizen journalists and activists who took to public protests with supporters worldwide joining in the online platform. Rajib Haider, a 26 year architect, who was a core member of BOAN and blogged under the pseudonym, *Thada Baba* was murdered on 14 February reportedly by sympathizers of the Jamaat-e-Islami.

In his chapter, “Entelechy, Eschatology, Blasphemy: A Burkean Study of Murder in Bangladesh”, Leslie Reynard writes:

On February 11, 2013, *Sonarbangla*, an Islamist blog hosted by Chhatra Shibir, the student wing of the now-banned Jamaat-e-Islami party, identified Ahmed Rajib Haider as *Thada Baba* and named him as the primary force behind the Shahbag demonstrations. The blog decried Haider as a blasphemous atheist whose posts insulted Islam and the Prophet. Days later, on February 14, Haider was found hacked to death on a public street near his home. The attackers were five men armed with machetes and knives who left Haider with his face “so lacerated that a relative who found the body wasn’t sure it was him until he called Haider’s phone and heard it ring inside a pocket.” (*Sharia Unveiled*

¹⁹⁷ Arup Kumar Sen, “Martyr, Mother, Inheritor,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 48, no. 12, March 23, 2013.

2013). In his last post uploaded that afternoon, Haider had asked Shahbag participants to focus on the boycott of Jamaat enterprises.¹⁹⁸

The ever growing importance of electronic media to get inside resistance movements and bring them to the attention of global audiences has been realized in recent times. The protests at Shahbag were fuelled by the new communication technologies. The Shahbag mor (intersection) which has been renamed *Projonmo Chottor* thus became a place where newly networked social forces and civil groups gathered and pressured for change. The resistance remembered Jahanara Imam, who had embodied their hopes in seeking justice for victims of the Bangladesh genocide. Transforming traditional forms of activism in place during her time, the resistance launched by students and young activists in Shahbag used modern forms of digital media as a platform to address political issues.

This shift in the methods and practices of using new media to draw global attention was historically a far cry from the nascent stages of the Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971, characterized by its lack of widespread public awareness. Anthony Mascarenhas, a journalist with *The Morning News*, Karachi was the first to report the brutality of Pakistan's attack on the rising Bangladeshi nationalism. When it was published in the *Sunday Times*, London on 13 June, 1971, it came as a public revelation for Bangladesh had been cut off from the rest of the world. Mascarenhas was perceived as a traitor by his country and his family was forced into hiding before the article was published. Realising the shortcomings of past efforts of creating public consciousness is important since the Shahbag protest was so distinctly different in terms of the massive media support and wide public reach. The resistance was no longer restricted in its meaning as frustrated expressions of marginality rather it grew in its dimension reflecting the changing nature of social networks and people's involvement.

Throughout the movement, the memory of Jahanara Imam was kept alive, her efforts serving as a driving force to inspire the protest. The maternal imagery was deeply embedded in the traditional Bengali conceptualization of the nation. Further, the image of 'Shaheed Janani' was prominently displayed at peace meetings, protest marches and demonstrations as an expression

¹⁹⁸ Leslie Reynard, "Entelechy, Eschatology, Blasphemy: A Burkean Study of Murder in Bangladesh," in *Radical Conflicts: Essays on Violence, Intractability, and Communication* (London: Lexington Books, 2016), 135.

of freedom and social unity. It evoked the dialectical relationship between the actual mother and the iconic maternal. The visual reference of Imam served to remind the public of the crime and injustice in the absence of the visible scars of the war. It provided the youth an avenue of reconciliation with a past that was buried or likely to be forgotten in public memory. In a way it created an aesthetic consciousness among the younger generation establishing the importance of rediscovery. It also reflected the fluid nature of memories of resistance. Resistance movements in Bangladesh with respect to its historical causes or socio-political agendas may be viewed as a continuous process of cultural circulation enabling the passing down of memories of war.

The fluid nature of memories of resistance mingles the past and the present in a common framework of thought. This framework attempts to unite the layers of time specific resistance activities in one continuum. The web of relations that emerges between the past and present allows individuals who are generations apart to be connected to the original event and those who lived through it. As descendants of the catastrophe, the youth in Bangladesh learned to recognize those who had paved the way for them to freely express their political opinion or dissent at present. Imam as ‘Shaheed Janani’ thus emerged as a popular symbol of resistance, one who had succeeded in laying the foundation of a legitimate social activism in Bangladesh. The contemporary media enforced and endorsed these representations in order to boost the phenomenal mass mobilization. It applauded the initiative of the youth in effectively using the available social, cultural and media resources. Bangladesh Online Activist Network (BOAN) essentially proved the way in which a tool of social interaction could be used as a tool of social mobilization. By keeping the youth informed about global discourses and their critical function as agents of the resistance, social media had the power to subvert the exclusion and marginalization of Bangladesh on a global platform.

The popular representations of Jahanara Imam helped to create a widespread appeal for the movement among both the young and the older generation of people in Bangladesh, besides drawing international interest in the ongoing resistance. Her figure served as an imaginative locus of belonging and identification recreating a bridge between the old and the new, the past and the present and recomposing a cultural fracture. She seemed to offer a synthesized notion of the cultural inheritance of resistance. Imam was therefore hailed as a representative of the

cultural force of Bangladesh symbolizing its absolute potential for organized civil structures and movement.

The memory of resistance in Bangladesh was marked by a generational transfer. The Shahbag gathering created an unprecedented protest culture in the country. It proved that the nation and its people remembered. The transfer of social memory from one generation to the next was technologically driven. The world community was exposed to the situation in Bangladesh through internet blogs and social networks. More importantly, in Bangladesh, the younger generation of protesters confronted violent extremists not only in public venues or physical spaces but also put forth their resistance to those perpetrating ideologies of violence on social networking sites to advance their own narratives and interests. These innovative and creative approaches crafted by the youth in Bangladesh radically transformed the meaning of resistance in public memory. It transformed the narrative of resistance into a real time exchange of information through the internet and media.

As opposed to personal memoirs and narratives of private resistance written during the years of conflict, the new protest facilitated the transfer of ideological convictions not through the traditional form of written literature or text but through the social media arenas which offered a meeting point or virtual forum for members of the resistance to share their views, experiences and common identity. The social structures involved in the personal recollection of memories of resistance during the war included family, relatives and local communities. The memoirs of 1971 frame a close knit community with its limited scope and objectives. However, in the event of the Shahbag protests, the social media gave protesters the opportunity of consolidating relationships over the Internet. It created a wider society capable of posing a direct challenge to the existing government and its ‘razakar’ collaborators. Although the Bangladesh Online Activist Network (BOAN) was regarded as a community advancing conspiratorial interests with its members accused of religious heresy by the Jamaat-e-Islami, it allowed individuals who were isolated or alienated both physically and psychologically to feel that they were connected to the resistance and empowered with respect to all social relations.

The iconic representation of motherhood in terms of attributing Imam with the title of ‘Shaheed Janani’ was also a step towards suggesting the capability of women in joining the resistance. It reflected the changing social contexts and different cultural norms that the younger

generation in Bangladesh wished to transmit to their women. Although the traditional Islamist society in Bangladesh has been anxious about the appropriate involvement of women in society, the strategic symbolism of Imam as 'Shaheed Janani' gave women the confidence of persuasively demonstrating their claim in the national discourse of resistance. Imam's image was filled with a dominant cultural message that Bangladeshi women were uniformly able and willing to chart their own courses of resistance and evoke their individual memories of resistance.

CHAPTER 5: POST-WAR REFLECTIONS

(5.1) Moving Beyond the ‘Birangona’ Discourse: A Study of Present Day Gender Issues in Bangladesh

This chapter will explore the social changes in Bangladesh in recent years, in an attempt to look across time and memory; to bring to light the various forms of interest and observe frames of reference through which the war returns to modern thought. It will attempt a critical reading of Taslima Nasrin’s *Amar Meyebela* to reflect on the way in which the traces of war have determined the life of a present generation woman intellectual and writer in Bangladesh. In this respect, the chapter will discuss some of the systematic problems and structural challenges faced by women in the years after liberation.

Since 1971, Bangladesh has undergone significant political and social changes. Most anthropological studies of the pre-war period recorded a discrepancy in terms of the ethnic identity of the majority in East Pakistan and their representation in state and political agencies directing attention to aspects such as economic instability, inequality, and class disparity rather than more traditional concerns such as race, religion, caste. Kalyan Chaudhuri in his book, *Genocide in Bangladesh* reflects on the political history of Bangladesh in the period between the Partition and the Liberation War and how it influenced the social anthropological pattern:

During 1947 and 1958 Pakistan had a parliamentary form of Government but actually the national legislature was a farce, sitting on an average 30 days a year, passing only 160 laws while the Governor-General or President passed 376 major ordinances. The farce ended when General Ayub Khan took over and promulgated Martial Law in 1958. In 1962, he enacted another Constitution which facilitated an army backed rule. This continued till 1969. Under this political aegis, the relation between the two wings developed into one which had a close resemblance to colonial exploitation...The result of

the exploitation was the 1948 and 1952 language movement, the 1956 movement for popular rule and the 1969 movement which saw the downfall of Ayub.¹⁹⁹

Post war, the periods of growth in Bangladesh may be roughly divided into two categories: 1972 to 1980 and 1980 to the present. Immediately after the war, the newly formed state of Bangladesh launched into a critical phase of nation building. The process of political reconstruction was a difficult one since the country had to not only overcome the weakness of the civilian administration but also the emergent challenges of a ruined economy, an internally fractured nascent military establishment, the lack of physical infrastructure and more importantly the factionalism that emerged due to the war.

Similar to the trajectory of its neighbouring India post independence, Bangladesh adopted a socialist doctrine in the years following the liberation struggle. While the obstacles arising out of feudalism, communalism and casteism persisted, the organised exploitative aspects of colonialism under Pakistani rule were undermined by the administrative, legal and popular reformist onslaughts. Banking and insurance sectors were nationalised by the Awami League (AL) immediately after the war. The socialist task of reconstructing the state and creating an egalitarian society would be achieved through the implementation of a homogenised nationalisation policy in 1972. The state adopted an active role in economic and social reform assuming control of industry, production, and distribution. However, it soon became evident that the national government, based on a compromise of various groups and organisations, served the interests of the political elite and urban bourgeoisie directly related to the ruling regime.

Ali Riaz in his book, *Bangladesh: A Political History since Independence* attributes the financial crisis in Bangladesh to the failure of the socialist agenda. By the end of 1972, the economic situation was on a decline, despite the government's initial efforts to fix the problems of infrastructure and mitigate the effects of the famine. The export of raw jute and jute products, a staple of the growing economy, fell drastically and the production level of nationalised industries (faced with a shortage of revenue) was decreasing causing unprecedented loss. Compounding the economic crisis was the internal conflict within the ruling party on the state directives promoting socialism. The economic plans of the Mujibur government sought to

¹⁹⁹ Kalyan Chaudhuri, *Genocide in Bangladesh* (Bombay: Orient Longman, 1972), 9.

achieve a comprehensive and dynamic representation and development of society. The faction within the party, dissatisfied with the social goals or new ideology referred to as 'Mujibism', moved towards an economy in keeping with the technological and budgetary laws of production, a 'scientific socialism'.

It became evident to this group mostly consisting of students and the youth that the socialist objectives of the state could be achieved only when properly balanced with a plan representing a totality of production relations and inclusive of the proletariat. The liberation struggle was incomplete as the peasant and labour class was still excluded from the centralist position. A split in the ruling party became inevitable as a result of such ideological differences and for the first time in the history of the new state, a politics of class conflict emerged challenging the hegemony and exploitation of the bourgeois power holders.

In more recent history, shifting global politics, changes in organisational and institutional tools of governance and global interdependence of financial markets and political relations have caused Bangladesh to confront and manage the trends of globalisation. A number of processes have constituted a new landscape in global politics: the fall of the Soviet Union, the insertion of China into an open economy and U.S.A. adopting a political trend towards neo-liberal globalisation. Concurrent to these events was the rise of religious extremism and political Islam in the East, the success of the Iranian Revolution and the Mujahideen uniting the multiethnic political conflict to oust the Soviet regime in Afghanistan. In the 1990's, domestic politics in Bangladesh gradually took a turn towards a more conservative religious ideology which included recognising the Jamaat-e-Islami as a legitimate political force and enabling the formation of allied Islamic parties such as Islami Oikya Jote (IOJ). The close association of the ruling party, Awami League with the Jamaat-e-Islami, proliferation of Islamic rhetoric and symbols, the emphasis on Islamic education and the gradual disappearance of the term 'socialist' from the political agenda of the AL post their 1996 victory confirmed the centralisation of Islamic thought in public life and politics.

However, in recent decades the paradox of development has been rendered more acute by the disturbing trends of anti-secularism in the country. The involvement of religion in public sphere has seriously challenged the scope of democracy in Bangladesh. While the state has repeatedly tried to establish an inclusive and democratic system of governance by rejecting all forms of

extremism and authoritarianism, the influence of religion has been instrumental in transforming political ideologies. Riaz explains:

Religion's presence in the public sphere in Bangladesh is not new but its transformation into a political ideology and a tool of mobilization is intrinsically connected to the legitimising efforts of the military regimes, namely Zia (1975-81) and Ershad (1982-90). The ideal disposition of the relationship between the state and religion, was never debated in Bangladesh, its articulation in the original constitution was fraught with various interpretations. Whether a secular state can be created without secularization of the society is an open question but what is beyond doubt is that Bangladeshi society has not embraced the debate with an open mind. State patronage since independence has created the environment for a heightened role of religion in politics, consequently Islamists have gained prominence after 1976...Discursive practises in Bangladeshi politics have changed so much in the past three decades that use of religion cannot be exclusively associated with Islamists anymore. The status of Islam as a state religion in the constitution is a case in point: JP introduced it, BNP maintained it, AL explicitly reinstated it through the fifteenth amendment.²⁰⁰

Although constitutionally Bangladesh was secularised, religion has been politically radicalised over time. Amendments in 1976 and 1977, led to the term 'secularism' being expunged from the Preamble and replaced with "faith in the almighty Allah". Article 12 which had established secular rule in the country was removed by the same Order. The worldwide resurgence of political Islam witnessed in Bangladesh a chain reaction wherein the state legitimised the use of religion as a determining agent of government policy and social behaviour. The combined influence of these factors has also affected the position of women in Bangladeshi society. To begin with, family socialisation into religious values is initiated from birth and similar to other Islamic nations determines education, marriage and inheritance in Bangladesh. While my research has discussed the social and political position of women in Bangladesh, it is important to account for their legal position in a traditional Islamic society.

²⁰⁰ Ali Riaz, *Bangladesh: A Political History since Independence* (London: I.B Tauris & Co. Ltd, 2016), 188-189.

The subjugation of women by a dominant hegemonic patriarchy may be further contextualized in terms of the legal contract of marriage between a man and a woman according to Islamic laws in Bangladesh. “For any class of women their husband would have to be their god.” Bangladeshi author, Taslima Nasrin quotes John Stuart Mill’s, *The Subjugation of Woman* (1852), in defence of her argument. “In the present age, marriage is the only space where legalised slave trade exists. By means of the accepted marriage laws men gain complete control over another individual. They gain lordship over the woman as they simultaneously gain the license to divorce at will.”²⁰¹ Nasrin questions the legal system which draws strength from cultural values, religious beliefs and moral concerns. The inequality of domestic law which does not consider the woman worthy enough to enjoy equality of status and rights even in the private contract of a marriage is perpetuated not merely by means of legislation but equally through religion. Nasrin perceives the female condition as shaped not only by the experiences of a colonial encounter and the system of legislation but a phenomenon which predates it. Religion is so intrinsically connected with the life and culture of Bangladesh that there has been no attempt to emancipate the woman from the restrictive practises authorised by Islam. Bangladesh is viewed not only as a nation carved out of the history of colonial enterprise but a nation deeply enmeshed in Islamic history which interfaces with political developments post 1971 and entirely controlled by a rigid patriarchal structure which denies any kind of female agency.

Taslima Nasrin in her book, *Nirbachito Column* (1992), which won the Ananda Purashkar, writes:

From the beginning of civilization, society and religion have controlled man and as leaders of society and religion, men have eternally exercised their supremacy. Along with society and the state, it is religion which has played the greatest role in arm twisting women into a position of subordination...Islam which prohibits infant killing and the practise of dowry seemed comforting to many women but this religion too has failed to give women their due respect. Our scriptures state that “Everything in this world is meant for the pleasure and consumption of man and the world’s greatest commodity is a woman of high moral virtue.”²⁰¹

²⁰¹ Taslima Nasrin, *Nirbachito Column* (Kolkata: Penguin Books Ltd, 2012), 24.

While there is considerable debate regarding Nasrin's interpretation of the Quran and 'Hadith' (Islamic literature), the purpose of mentioning Nasrin's newspaper columns is to elaborate upon the function of religion, which has served as a totalising force in the country since Independence and in recent times may also be regarded as one of the major impediments to the social participation of women in Bangladesh. Despite the undercurrent of tolerance and adaptability, religion enforces legitimacy of law which is framed in conformity to religious principles. Since women have been excluded from the formational processes of religious tradition, they are consequently disenfranchised from their legal rights and social responsibilities by religion itself.

Democratic politics provides the context in which individual rights should and can be enhanced. An important aspect of this enhancement is women's rights. However, despite widespread democratic transitions across the world, actual policy achievements on women's rights since democratization vary dramatically across the world. In Catholic democracies, for example, the conflicts between religious orthodoxy and women's rights have been particularly conflictual, especially on abortion. The church consistently opposes any form of legal abortion and in many Catholic Latin American countries access to legal and safe abortion is still restricted.

The notion of secular liberalism or human rights in Bangladesh, as in other predominantly Islamic nations has at times been severely compromised despite the superficial traces of neo-liberalism which may be attributed to the process of rapid globalization. Hence, the debate surrounding the violation of these rights is often neglected within the specific cultural context since religious laws have become analogous with state or civil laws in most cases. Nasrin remarks about the same in a rather inflammatory passage in *Nirbachito Column*, "Women in our country are like masses of flesh. They are meant for the pleasure of men and are therefore legally dispensable. Women are worthless pieces of flesh."²⁰²

Despite the anecdotal tendency, Nasrin draws attention to what she considers a critical problem in Islamic thought. The body of the woman is often regarded as a commodity which may be used for pleasure and dispensed with as easily as it can be acquired. The systematic differentiation of Islamic theology has worsened the condition of women in traditional Muslim societies. The canonization of Sharia (Islamic laws) has complicated the position of women within the religious

²⁰² Taslima Nasrin, *Nirbachito Column* (Kolkata: Penguin Books Ltd, 2012), 26.

discourse. The foundation of the Sharia lies in the interpretation of religious instruction written in the Quran and the Sunnah. The words of Prophet Mohammed as recorded in testimony constitute a religious code or 'hadith' practised by Muslims. Theologians and religious scholars have over time interpreted and modified the Prophet's sayings mostly pertaining to prayer, 'zakat' (almsgiving) and fasting into a systematic legal doctrine. This collective form of jurisprudence commonly known as 'fiqh' has governed aspects of Muslim social and personal life. Different schools of Islamic thought have interpreted the Quran differently. However, the creation of the Sharia constructed a rigid legal system which legitimised God's law as supreme and concretised Islamic jurisprudence as incontrovertible.

State laws in Islamic nations therefore cannot contravene the tenets and provisions of the Sharia. Law makers and legal agencies in Bangladesh found it easier to establish laws which were consistent with the Quran and the Sunnah. The Sharia which has been explicitly proposed and taught by men involved a strict often discriminatory interpretation of the role of women in society. Despite the emerging opportunities for women in Bangladesh, the Sharia- based principles are pivotal in Bangladesh. Women in Bangladesh qualify economically as liability groups and in the rural sector are mostly engaged in informal familial productions or enterprises with limited opportunities and labour market participation. The success of the Grameen Bank of Bangladesh in 1983, a specialised micro-credit institution which promoted small scale industries and identified 95% of its borrowers as women was a distinctive step towards social progressivism. However, a discussion about the role of women included a need to revise the basics of Sharia law pertaining to aspects of everyday life such as women's consent for marriage, safeguarding the interests of women against polygamy and divorce and the protection of women's inheritance and land rights.

Feminist writers such as Taslima Nasrin have faced severe opposition from a class of Muslim clerics and leaders who have insisted on maintaining the strong tradition of Sharia laws in the country employing a standard majoritarian argument and enforcing a religious rhetoric on the protest launched by writers and women's groups. In 1990, wide spread demonstrations and marches were organised by Islamic fundamentalists (Council of Islamic Soldiers) in Dhaka protesting against Nasrin's writing and attacking the office of her publishers, Jonokontho. Her editors were arrested on government initiated charges of 'causing hurt to religious sentiment'.

Nasrin's novel, *Lajja* (Shame), was banned in Bangladesh and she was forced to permanently leave the country amidst death threats from religious extremist groups. Answering a High Court petition, she claimed that her position was not against Islam or Islamists but against the Sharia which required reform to accommodate gender equality and justice. However, despite her success in resolving the legal dispute, Nasrin who was declared as 'apostate' and 'blasphemer' by opposing religious factions had to flee Bangladesh in 1994 and has been living in exile ever since.

Amitav Ghosh in an article titled, "The Fundamentalist Challenge" in the *Wilson Quarterly* explains why religious extremism is at odds with cultures of dissent and how it creates a hostile environment when involved with liberal arts or literature

There is also much evidence to show that as the concerns of major religions have grown more and more sociological, their doctrines and institutions have also increasingly converged. Yet, while we speak of doctrine, we are still within a domain which is recognizably religious. But the truth is that in those areas of the world which are currently beset by religious turmoil one very rarely hears anyone speak of doctrine or faith. In many of these areas, by a curious inversion, the language of religious hatred is not a religious language at all. The voices that spew hate are invariably draw on more incendiary sources. One of these is the language of quantity, of number- statistics, in other words, that famous syntax of falsehood.²⁰³

Literature which does not reflect the view or speak the language of the 'majority' is often perceived as being opposed to popular religious discourse, as being entirely devoid of any truth or faith.

For most of human history, religion and literature have been virtually inseparable, everywhere. I can think of nonreligious ideologies that have thought of literature as an enemy; I know of no religion that has historically held that position. That is why we must be rigorous and unrelenting in our rejection of the claims of those religious extremists who try to invoke historical and religious precedents for their attack on writers. These

²⁰³ Amitav Ghosh, "The Fundamentalist Challenge," *The Wilson Quarterly* 19, no. 2 (1995): 25, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40258975>.

claims are offered in bad faith. In fact, the roots of this hostility lie in the eminently modern pedigree of their own moments of conversion. The religions they invoke do not begin with a positive content of faith; they have their beginnings in acts of negation.²⁰⁴

The rhetoric of religious extremism if sponsored and disseminated by state agencies such as the bureaucracy, education boards, the law and court becomes more dangerous because these public institutions (besides their traditional function) authoritatively assume the responsibility of upholding largely bourgeois concerns regarding modesty and righteousness. As a measure of conservatism, the majority is led to undermine the logic or rationality of dissenting (minority) groups or voices in an effort to preserve and authenticate its own prerogatives.

The publication of Nasrin's *Lajja* (Shame) in 1993 created an outrage in Bangladesh. It was an immediate bestseller in Bangladesh and parts of India due to the early attention it garnered from readers. The book was banned a few months later by the government of Bangladesh in keeping with the demands of fundamentalist religious groups. It is important to note that despite their influence, these religious extremist groups form a small *minority* in the country. Written in the context of the demolition of the Babri masjid in Ayodhya on 6th December, 1992, the narrative frames the experiences of a Hindu family faced with religious violence in Muslim dominated Bangladesh. The book critically cited newspaper reports, producing data published by human rights organisations and referring to actual incidents of communal violence which occurred in the immediate aftermath of the Babri masjid demolition.

Nasrin's book, however, also received considerable criticism from the broadly secular liberal groups of writers and social commentators in Bangladesh, who maintained that the novel had completely alienated the narrative from the real political context in which it would have been more convincingly located. The Hindu family depicted in *Lajja* are shown occupying a marginal position in Bangladesh and withdrawn from the legitimate political context of violence in India. They merely experience a ripple effect leading to distortions in the representations of the anxiety and victimhood which were felt by those target groups directly affected by the Ayodhya violence.

²⁰⁴. Amitav Ghosh, "The Fundamentalist Challenge," *The Wilson Quarterly* 19, no. 2 (1995): 25, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40258975>.

As I discovered during my fieldwork in Bangladesh, the repercussions of the Babri masjid demolition were felt in parts of Bangladesh and the Hindu minority suffered brutally the backlash of communal conflicts in India. Temples were attacked and Hindu owned businesses were destroyed. The peace between the two communities is still tenuous and the underlying tensions, (a legacy of the Partition and Independence) are apparent to those who dwell in predominantly Muslim neighbourhoods isolated from others of their ilk.

In the aftermath of the Babri Masjid demolition, the Hindu population living in Bangladesh and Pakistan found themselves facing threat to life combined with the perception that the religion they identify with has high entitativity and therefore is discriminatory on communal grounds. However, unlike the widespread communal violence which broke out between Hindus and Muslims in parts of India leading to the death of an estimated 2000 people, the loss of lives in Bangladesh and Pakistan over the Ayodhya dispute was far less in comparison to the severe public disturbances and riots which were reported. An article in *The New York Times*, dated, 8th December, 1992, reported:

Muslims attacked more than 30 Hindu temples across Pakistan today, and the Government of this overwhelmingly Muslim nation closed offices and schools for a day to protest the destruction of a mosque in India. In Lahore, thousands of people accompanied a bulldozer in demolishing an abandoned Hindu temple. Crowds set fire to six other temples and stormed the office of Air-India...In Bangladesh, a mainly Muslim country east of India, thousands of Muslims broke police cordons and set fire to the Air-India office in Dhaka, the capital.²⁰⁵

In this respect, the narrative of Taslima Nasrin's *Lajja* recalls the experience of the fringes and the sporadic violence faced by numerically weaker sections of the general population in pockets of Bangladesh due to the more large scale event which had occurred in India. It did not serve the purpose of interpreting the implications of the communal tension in the wake of the Ayodhya conflict or of providing a comprehensive account of the disparities resulting from religious belief.

²⁰⁵ Reuters, "Pakistanis Attack 30 Hindu Temples," *The New York Times*, December 8, 1992, <https://www.nytimes.com/1992/12/08/world/pakistanis-attack-30-hindu-temples.html>

Despite the diverse criticism which the text has generated, it was certainly not an attempt to stir up anti-Muslim sentiments or to reject a specific religious doctrine. The book, however, became a locus of clashing ideologies and debates despite Nasrin's emphatic self-identification as a liberal secularist. Nasrin has defended her writing as not explicitly provoking any form of religious hostility but seeking to offer a meaningful alternative to religious dogmas with profound issues such as human dignity, justice and liberty being given greater importance than the rigid imposition of doctrinal values. Her works are a trenchant exposition of socio-religious conditions which persist in Bangladesh and the manipulation or exploitation of religious norms which lead to the propagation of a form of totalitarianism exemplified by radical Islam.

The publication of *Lajja* was controversial at that time since Hindu supremacists in India used the book as a tool to incite Hindutva sentiment and highlight the systematic violence inflicted by the Muslims on the Hindu community. Exploiting the trope of dispossession and homelessness experienced by the protagonist, Suranjan Datta, the book was used to fuel the movement towards the establishment of a Hindu religious right or claim over the Babri masjid land from the tangled history of interpretations and evaluations. Further, fundamental Hindu activists vilified the Muslim identity through the agency of the book as one which was inherently prone to violence, conflict and oppression of the 'peaceful' Hindu community.

They perhaps failed to recognise that *Lajja* was essentially an effort to construct to a liberal foundation that would recover a sense of religious pluralism and present the pitfalls of religious bigotry. The book became controversial because it was mostly available and read in translation (English) and understood as subversive to religious order which corresponded to the democratic forms of political life. It was charged of being insular and myopic. Ghosh in his article, "The Fundamentalist Challenge" defends Nasrin's cause as a writer. He asserts:

In passing into the public domain, a book also passes beyond its author's control...We who write fiction, even when we deal with matters of public significance, have no choice, no matter how lush or extravagant our fictions, but to represent events as they are refracted through our characters. Our point of entry into even the largest of events is

inevitably local, situated in and focused on details and particulars. To write of any event in this way is necessarily to neglect its political contexts.²⁰⁶

For the purpose of analyzing the inter-locked existence of women, religion and the nation in the present context, a discussion of Nasrin's memoir, *Amar Meyebela* may be useful. Nasrin uses her experience of growing up in Bangladesh as a significant ideological paradigm in understanding the causes for the succession of authoritarian regimes that had emerged in the aftermath of the Liberation War. Further, she attempts to represent the experience of women in post war Bangladesh where broader and more complex cultural issues persist despite the change in political condition. Through self enquiry her autobiography examines gender roles in a community where middle class women are trapped between conflicting expectations: to be silent and receptive but as paternal commodities expected to display their accomplishments to suit the demands of a marriage market.

Through *Meyebela*, Nasrin attempts to negotiate with social norms which reveal a potentially oppressive need for public silence by expecting to create a modestly silent woman within a framework of bourgeois domesticity. Her private conversation contextualises the masculine cultural economy within the paradigm of religion in Bangladesh. The mediation between the state and women is complicated by the overarching presence of religion which attempts to avoid public disorder through carefully controlled narratives. The function of women has been subject to moral guidance in Islam and the state has consciously adopted public symbols of religious conformity (such as the hijab) by including behavioural codes prescribed for women within its legal system.

The Sharia or 'Hadiths', Nasrin addresses emphasised the immutability of religious instruction and the dangers of implanting a religious code within a legal discourse. The misogyny inherent in these laws and their misapplication further marginalised women in society particularly in marriage. Nasrin writes:

"Your women are your tilth; go, then, unto your tilth as you may desire", Sura-al-Baqarah (2:223) grants this permission to men. Muslim domestic laws widen the

²⁰⁶ Amitav Ghosh, "The Fundamentalist Challenge," *The Wilson Quarterly* 19, no. 2 (1995): 28, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40258975>

disparity between the man and the woman even further. According to the Muslim Domestic Law of 1961 (which is based on the religious code) a girl inherits only half the property of her father as compared to a son. If the law establishes a difference between off springs of the same parents simply based on their gender, then it is not unnatural that such a distinction will exist in all man- woman relationships in our society.²⁰⁷

Nasrin observes that the legislation seems mostly preoccupied with maintaining the limits of decency among women rather than punishing the indecencies committed against them. The introduction of modern legislation acts as a cementing force rather than a bulwark against binding the religious with the secular.

On 28th March, last year, the leading daily newspapers in Bangladesh published an important directive issued by the government. It stated, “In order to preserve the social and religious dignity of women, all sarees made in Bangladesh (for adult women) will be increased in length by 1.22 m and by 5.54 m in breadth. All saree manufacturers will have to implement the changes in measurement within 7 days. Anyone found guilty of disobeying the law will be suitably punished”. This implies that women were previously not maintaining their social and religious dignity. A woman should decide according to her own choice, comfort and means what kind of a saree she should purchase. The role of the government in measuring out sarees for women in order to preserve religious sentiment is unlawful.²⁰⁸

The distinction between Islamic and non-Islamic is blurred to the extent that the shared idiom of secular law and religious law makes the interpretation of legality broadly cultural and experiential rather than purely legal or theological. In modern day Bangladesh, despite the rapid social and economic changes, the majority of women in the rural population are involved in family oriented local businesses. In the urban sector, women form a negligible share of the labour market in comparison to men. In a democracy the involvement of women in the decision making agencies of the government is essential to realise goals of equity and development. With

²⁰⁷ Taslima Nasrin, *Nirbachito Column* (Kolkata: Penguin Books Ltd, 2012), 43

²⁰⁸ Ibid., 47.

the nation being successively led by two women leaders in the recent past and at present it would be expected that empowerment of women would occur through the integration of their social roles with public or political roles. However, the insignificant presence of women in the national economy and lower levels of political representation raises questions not only about the democratic process but the extent to which religion controls and inhibits their involvement in both these aspects.

This is not to say that the electoral quotas reserved for women have progressively improved since 1971. The Union Parishad Ordinance of 1976 reserved two seats for women which was increased to three in 1983 and later revised in the Local Government (Union Parishad) Second Amendment Act of 1997 where the three seats reserved for women were provisioned to be filled through direct election. In Parliament, the quotas reserved for women have been subject to constant sometimes erratic change. The Constitution framed after Independence reserved 15 seats for women which constituted 4.8% of the total strength. In 1979, the number was doubled and reached 9.7%. It was suspended briefly in 1987 for three years before being constitutionally restored in 1990. However, in 2000 the percentage of seats reserved for women met with a series of debates and was entirely removed. At present, the situation has considerably changed, however, a recent report published in the *Dhaka Tribune* on 8th March, 2018 states,

Women's representation in Bangladesh Parliament may seem satisfactory in terms of number, but when it comes to active participation in policy-making and public service, the picture is quite different. In the current parliament, there are a total of 71 women lawmakers, 50 of whom occupy reserved seats. The elected lawmakers are mostly from the Awami League. Despite occupying one-fifth of the parliamentary seats, the women lawmakers do not get the same space as their male counterparts in decision-making and legislative processes, and are also held back in terms of facilities and allocations. "The difference between allocations to the elected MPs [members of parliament] and the reserved seat MPs is huge, but we work as hard as the elected MPs," said Safura Begum, Awami League lawmaker from Reserved Seat 2. Gender-based discrimination is also a huge obstacle. "Competing against our male colleagues is difficult; negative bias against women still exists in the political parties. Our male colleagues do not want to see us rise,

and we face discriminatory attitudes even from our leaders,” said Hazera Khatun, the sole reserved seat MP from the Workers’ Party of Bangladesh.²⁰⁹

It is therefore not surprising that the influence of religious law on the lives of women in Bangladesh is supreme because political representation does not assure control over state policies or non-governmental (religious) organisations which have absolute authority to promulgate their own legal provisions with cooperation from the elected majority of male lawmakers in the country. Perhaps it is the growing pressure to expand and preserve the Sharia laws which leads to a continuous system of legislation complicit with religious objectives instead of the democratic goals of an elected government. The mass support for Sharia has in many Muslim majority states of the world been translated into extensive Islamic social and economic reforms.

But while in Bangladesh, Sharia proponents argue that the implementation of Islamic laws would improve the quality of governance, social justice and economic development by implementing shared standards of religious and ethical morality, they have failed to interpret the values of democratisation which seek to serve the needs of all ordinary citizens. The demand for economic equality and a communitarian approach among the lower and middle class Muslims have engendered popular support for the Sharia as a means of securing redistributive economic reforms and political accountability. Yet, Sharia policies have fundamentally been unconstitutional and anti-democratic in spirit. The lack of secular orientations in state policies is certainly a disturbing trend but what is an even more prominent concern is the manner in which Sharia laws are used as a means of distinguishing between men and women. In Bangladesh the dynamics and tactics of religious violence have shifted from an inter-religious or inter-faith conflict to a coordinated, less communal distinction between believers and non-believers.

Muslim political and religious elites have persecuted those who asserted a religious ownership in reading the holy text and interpreting its tenets and practises according to a broader democratic framework and the needs of a modern society. The fatwa issued against Salman Rushdie for his novel, *Satanic Verses* by Ayatollah Khomeini of Iran in 1989 immediately occurs to one’s mind in this respect and may be compared to a similar pattern of harassment,

²⁰⁹ Nawaz Farhin, “Women in Parliament: Impressive only in number,” *Dhaka Tribune*, March 8, 2018, <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/2018/03/08/women-parliament-impressive-number>

controversy and abuse targeted at Nasrin for adopting a language of fairness and critiquing the terms of treatment of women by Sharia laws in Bangladesh.

The reliance on the principles of the Sharia for the purpose of legislation and jurisprudence can be highly dubious. It is after all the state's responsibility to ensure that social justice is offered to all its citizens. The notion of prudent management through judicious and fair laws is ostensibly contained within a Sharia system. However, the vague legalistic defences of women's rights and liberties in the Sharia have been subject to considerable debate and criticism. Nasrin writes:

Medical jurisprudence states that if any man without the consent of a woman of the minimum age of 15 or even his own wife, physically abuses and/or forcibly engages in sexual intercourse (through penetration) then it qualifies as rape and rape is a punishable offence under law. But the Tirmidhi Hadith Sharif (1160) states clearly that "When a man calls his wife to fulfill his need, then let her come, even if she is at the oven." How can these two beliefs be reconciled?²¹⁰

Further, the history of colonial exploitation in Bangladesh before independence has often been associated with the crippling of a nation. Nasrin considers Bangladesh as suffering from a "congenital anomaly", a birth defect leading to deformity and she perceives its people as inheritors of the disease. The master-slave material relationship established between the coloniser and the colonised had certainly resulted in a form of disempowerment. It had given birth to deep psychological anxieties and concerns about the loss of masculinity. The metaphorical emasculation of the subjugated group in colonial cultures has been a familiar premise. Nasrin suggests that in Bangladesh it is the Bangali 'bhadra mahila' (gentlewoman), who has faithfully served the purpose of reaffirming a false sense of dominance and masculine authority among the male community. In the absence of political, cultural and social authority, the colonised man has always perceived the woman as a means of self-assertion. She represents a territory which can be easily dominated, exploited and abused at will. In a post-independence era, at the primary level, there has been a shift in the structures of domination leading to a substitution of the marginalised native with the woman.

²¹⁰ Taslima Nasrin, *Nirbachito Column* (Kolkata: Penguin Books Ltd, 2012), 52.

(5.2) Negotiating the Past in the Present through Contemporary Memoirs: A Critical Reading of Taslima Nasrin's *Amar Meyebela*

Like most memoirs, Nasrin's *Amar Meyebela* functions as a reflection of her personal history and peripherally as a recollection of the social circumstances which determined the early years of her development post 1971, but it also offers a nuanced reading of a neo-conservative patriarchy located within a modern Bangladesh. Post Independence the government made great efforts to encourage women to participate in the new political life but in gender-specific ways, much like the 'birangona' or the 'shaheed janani' who were glorified as war heroines and made an essential part of the political mobilisation during the early 1970's but cohesively categorised by their gender identity. Nasrin's father encouraged her to pursue a medical training as a doctor but within the expectations or limitations incumbent on a woman. The aim of this chapter is not to draw a parallel between the 'birangona' narratives and Nasrin's *Amar Meyebela* or to de-historicise it in any way but to read the text within a shared cultural paradigm. Instead of viewing the memoir as being purely a product of a modern intellect, this section will explore the negotiation of a political past in context of the makings of present day Bangladesh through the work of a contemporary Bengali woman writer.

The memoir emerges through a process which enters into a complex relationship with earlier women's literary production in order to become a collaborative inscription of women's experiences in Bangladesh. These inter generational negotiations make the study of the memoir interesting since it allows a full understanding of the contextual material and the emergent literature leading to the formation of a historically continuous discourse on women in Bangladesh.

The first chapter of Nasrin's *Meyebela* titled "The Years of the War" recognises its place in history and the forces shaping its production. It marks a point of interaction between the historical past and the narrator's subjective existence.

There were two three wheeled vehicles which came and stood in front of our house in the evening. We sat in the vehicle and left for Madarinagar village which was south of the Paanchrukhi market. No sooner had we left the city, crossed the Brahmaputra river and

reached the village, than two young men with ‘gamchha’ tightly drawn around their waist ambushed us in a nearby forest. I held my mother’s arm in bewilderment and noticed that they were carrying two rifles on their shoulder. I figured this was what they called ‘war’, suddenly attacking people and killing them.²¹¹

The narrator’s viewpoint is embedded in the dominant liberation narrative from the beginning and the interactional discourse develops to reveal a life story which encodes historical events, cultural conventions and attitudes. It shows the emplotment of even the simplest accounts of personal experience and the manner in which a modern memoir, a recent work of art or the ongoing production of texts may reflect particular ways of knowing and connecting past realities. The text then attempts to serve the needs of the present moment through a complex interpenetrating pattern that evokes the past in an emerging discourse so that the inherent ambiguity of experience is rendered comprehensible and coherent both for the narrator and the reader.

Through this chapter my attempt has been to examine the afterlife of memory studies in the context of the Liberation War of Bangladesh, 1971. With the advent of electronic media which actively seeks to digitally archive records of historical, political and social events, the written memoir has effectively diminished in value as a resource of collective history. Oral and written records are gradually being displaced by the emphasis on the visual which tries to debunk the idea of past histories or memories as repetitive and banal by animating representations of a past time. While the visual has certainly expanded the category of experience, the memoir often transforms the study of memory by involving emotional aspects which enlarge the scope of human subjectivity in memory studies. The relevance of reading a memoir, *Meyebela* as a text which is closely entangled in familial, nationalist and hetero-patriarchal interests is likely to be open to critical debate particularly when the focus of this research has been to read testimonies as records of alternative history specifically in the context of the Liberation War of Bangladesh, 1971.

However, the point of commonality between these texts is that they articulate certain anxieties which signal the continuity of distinctive social orders in Bangladesh, where women are

²¹¹ Taslima Nasrin, *Meyebela* (Kolkata: Ananda Publishers, 2013), 9.

expected to perform particular roles despite their diverse experiences and range of subject positions. Locating these texts within the cultural archives can not only allow us to identify evolution but also trace the tacit maintenance of gendered spaces and notions of public piety associated with women. Further, it is interesting to note that across periods of time from 1971 to the present there is a repetition of discourses concerning women. The patterns of repetition of external social conduct are palpable despite the difference in time and space. Giles Deleuze explains this concept in his book, *Difference and Repetition* (1968):

To repeat is to behave in a certain manner, but in relation to something unique or singular which has no equal or equivalent. And perhaps, this repetition at the level of external conduct echoes, for its own part, a more secret vibration which animates it, a more profound internal repetition within the singular...Repetition can be 'represented' as extreme resemblance or perfect equivalence, but the fact that one can pass by degrees from one thing to another does not prevent their being different in kind.²¹²

The dominant discourse surrounding women may remain the same but the institutions and actors are constantly changing. The difference which emerges in spite of the repetition of social codes and behaviours may be traced through these overlapping private histories and articulations of anxiety.

The unfolding of the past into present experience is mediated by the emotional state of the author and subjective responses to existing socio-cultural conditions. Human memory performs a range of tasks in organising ideas and distinguishing between the affective and real aspects of thought. While there is always a reductive privileging of fact over emotion, these reflexive forms of thinking may be convincingly translated into a historical narrative and conjugated with events such as war, political conflicts, and civil mass movements. In *Meyebela*, the emotional memory of an oppressive childhood with an authoritarian father figure is combined with the experience of women in Bangladesh contextualised within family stories.

The context is embedded within the emotional categories of anger, fear, sadness, disgust which she experiences with her father. The affective value of the childhood experience may be located within a memory paradigm which is not only personal but also cultural. It reflects the

²¹² Giles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (London: Continuum, 2001), 1-2.

possibilities of women's relationships with male members of their family and becomes almost representational in terms of the stress and disturbance women experience within patriarchal conservative family structures. The memory then is anchored back to not only an immediate traumatic event in one's personal history but allegorically connects with a remote cultural history of nation rupture and reconstruction.

These diverse negotiations with the past produce an embodied memory which is seen as somehow more present and intense than they really are. The involvement of personal feeling or emotion leads the individual into a precognitive mode of perceiving his/her context. Joseph LeDoux in his seminal work, *The Emotional Brain: The Mysterious Underpinnings of Emotional Life* (1998) regards emotional memory as essential to human cognition since these processes "guide reflexive, instinctive, biologically prepared or genetically disposed behaviour"²¹³. To make matters simple, LeDoux' hypothesis may be understood as proposing an associative system. Emotions are adaptive to thoughts, beliefs and cultural values. An individual adapts to cultural changes in the immediate context through affective experience.

The memoir in certain ways facilitates this process of relating emotional conditions with representational cultural spaces and time periods. The affective responses involved in memory engage with the present immediately but also produce anachronistic experiences which relate to a collective cultural past. In the first chapter of *Meyebela*, Nasrin writes:

The roads in Dapuniya village were crowded with people running about proclaiming 'Joy Bangla, Joy Bangla'. Yesterday there were sounds of rifle guns and wails of grief but today there was joy and celebration. From today no houses will be burnt, no guns will be shot, no bombs will be fired, no one will be taken away forcefully, the air won't be filled with the stench of burning flesh and the sky won't be dark with circling vultures. We will return home to the city. I will return to my room, the comfort of my own bed and sleep with my pillow enclosed in my arms. My dolls are still asleep in their tiny cot. I will return and wake them up.²¹⁴

²¹³ Joseph LeDoux, *The Emotional Brain: The Mysterious Underpinnings of Emotional Life* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1998), 250.

²¹⁴ Taslima Nasrin, *Meyebela* (Kolkata: Ananda Publishers, 2013), 18.

Immediately, one notices that the memoir combines the personal affective with the universal objective. Now, an issue which requires further exploration is the manner in which these memoirs reinstate alternative modes of subjectivity and agency for women in relation to state oriented responses and hegemonic oppositional discourses. Nasrin's writing has often been charged as being a practice which seeks to transgress the doctrines of Islam and signifying a disengagement from the traditional Muslim community. However, the subject position of the individual cannot be denied because it is context specific and created through the conflicts with religious patriarchies and contemporary economic and cultural disparities.

The memoir reflects the complicated interrelation of gender, subject, religion and nationalism in Bangladesh and the tendency of such hegemonic projects to engender various forms of violence against women. The attempt to transform utterances from one discursive context to the other not only initiates the quest for cultural, social and sexual freedom but also makes her a legitimate target of family, community and nation-based violence. Through Nasrin's narrative, the private memory becomes ostensibly familiar and mirrors the conventional gendered position of the woman in a third world nation which widely traces a top-down policy of radical Islamization in law and society.

Although the previous chapters contained a more focused historical contextualisation of trauma, the idea is to trace the resonances of the same in more recent narratives. Trauma becomes according to Cathy Caruth a "cultural metaphor" that encompasses a wide historical time. It remains inherent in the structures of human experience even in the absence of specific events or circumstances. The attempt here is not to universalise trauma as a homogenous collective experience but to understand how trauma can disrupt and damage a community and also create specific social climates and communal moods within which the individual thrives. Nasrin's memoir evokes deeply distressing experiences of childhood and family trauma which may be read from different perspectives- the personal, social, and political. Her experiences may also be connected to the traumatic nature of culture and history in Bangladesh and understood as a continuation of a shared literary heritage. My purpose is not to uncritically impose a mindset of the present onto texts of the past but consciously being anachronistic in order to reveal resonances between the two.

In *Meyebela*, Nasrin recounts an experience when as a young girl she along with her mother, grandmother and siblings had lodged at a relative's house in Dapuniya village during the war.

After reaching my *mama*'s (uncle) house at Dapuniya village, I had seen Khaled for the first time that night. When Hashim *mama* went to join the war, his son, Khaled went with him. *Mama* never returned. Khaled and a group of young men secretly operated near the village. It was a cold night when I crept under the blanket, sleeping on a stack of hay to keep myself warm. My little brother was fast asleep next to me. He fell asleep as soon as his head touched the pillow. If he hadn't been sleeping, he would have surely started crying and the men would have shot him down, along with me and my sister, Yasmin. Suddenly, I realized that a few men wearing boots had entered the room. I presumed they were there to loot the house. Their eyes and mouth were dripping with lust. A few of them used a torch to scan the corners of the dark room. I was almost awake by then but too afraid to raise an alarm. With his gun on his shoulder, Khaled bent a little towards me. I could vaguely recognize his face. The straw bed and the heavy *kantha* blanket could not keep my cold body warm anymore. I lay frozen as a corpse as he had his way with me.²¹⁵

She returns to her childhood to recall an incident which had involved a close relative and had caused her profound mental and emotional anguish. There were many casualties in the war, Nasrin considers herself to be a minor one. She mentions that most women in Bangladesh who lived through the war would be able to remember one such incident, either endured privately or heard from others. While the specificities of the childhood experience are often blurred, Nasrin's *Meyebela* and the second part of her memoir, *Dwikhondito* discuss many such episodes which structurally revolve around the processes of remembering, narrating and working through trauma. She steps into a minute self examination which reveals an inner process conjoined with a specific moment within a historical context that produces the traumatic memory.

Much like the testimonies of the 'birangona', which are subsumed and silenced within a national discourse, Nasrin's account is not institutionally recognised and is difficult to contain. The visible incompatibilities with the tradition of women's writing in Bangladesh make its integration within the corpus complicated. The recollection or construction of her pain remains

²¹⁵ Taslima Nasrin, *Meyebela* (Kolkata: Ananda Publishers, 2013), 20.

the principal focus, where she pieces together a mosaic of an all-pervasive cultural ideology (within which these episodes were not extraordinary) and which meticulously unearths the features, gestures and distinctions which characterised women's experiences in Bangladesh. Her memoir does so much to record moments of childhood innocence and romantic self fulfilment as it undertakes to document or even understand the causes and context which are consequential to her present state of mature womanhood.

In another account, Nasrin recollects the months immediately after the war, upon their return to Dhaka:

My grandmother searched the pile of bones. These bones were recovered from the well at the big mosque in Dhaka. Numerous people had gathered to look at the spectacle. They searched for the bones of their lost sons and their husbands. My grandmother searched in the pile as well: human skeletons, ribs, wrists, skulls. Grandmother was searching for Hashim's (her son) bones. Evening approached and the people departed wiping their tears with their handkerchief. My grandmother sat near the well at the mosque immersed in the pile of bones, searching for Hashim's.²¹⁶

The connection and identification to national 'genocidal' tropes changes the direction and force of the narrative allowing a sense of ownership of personal feelings and experiences as well as a wider sense of belonging to the nation. It communicates a sense of a lived life through language as well as an integrated life with the nation. The incident recalled: of her grandmother sifting through the pile of bones at the mosque in search of her son, Hashim's remains ends the first section of Nasrin's narrative on her childhood years, the ones spent in close proximity to the Liberation War. While the memoir moves into other deliberations and concerns after the primary exposition, it commemorates a watershed in the process of history-making.

The early awareness of fracture and alienation emphasises her self-identification with a group and delineating her position as an insider. The visceral and personal experiences which exist within a broader embodied historical domain show how the circumstances of the Liberation War operate as a trigger to generate affective responses of identification and difference. These responses persist and shape the individual's later development. Nasrin explores the fragments:

²¹⁶ Taslima Nasrin, *Meyebela* (Kolkata: Ananda Publishers, 2013), 23.

the rites, beliefs, practises which govern her formative years even noticing its contradictions while she is growing into young adulthood.

The oppressive, confining circumstances which cause disruptions in her childhood years: the sudden flight from Dhaka due to the outbreak of the war, adjusting to provincial life, the absence of her father are created no doubt due to the political situation in the country. Yet, she is dismayed to find that these sets of convention and practises (particularly those surrounding women) are perpetuated and even strengthened within restored family structures after the war. The norms which are stringently imposed upon her during the period of war are not defused upon returning to the regularity of everyday life. In fact, her now more developed consciousness is able to fathom an emerging pattern of coherence.

This process is complicated by the inclusion of self defined ideas of freedom, gender equality and respect which have been thought to be endorsing anti-religious views and sentiments. The sexual encounters and the physical experiences Nasrin records have been regarded as an expression of her putative transgressive subjectivity since the possibility of such action is against the Islamic feminine tradition. The modes of embodiment, bodily practises such as dress, demeanour and posture, marriage and childbirth are important aspects of this tradition as is the control over women's sexuality. Nasrin writes:

Before I was born, my mother had two sons. It was good fortune that sons were born or else who would have continued the family line! Daughters are not meant to carry forward the family name. They have decorative value, they are meant to help their mothers in household chores, maintain the house and please the male members of the family. After two sons my father said that a daughter was needed. A daughter was likewise produced. But her daughter turned out to be different, legs on top and head at the bottom.²¹⁷

Nasrin then describes the painful process of childbirth that her mother had to endure when she was born: a memory her mother would often recall when Taslima requested her for a story.

“When you were in my stomach, I had slipped and fallen down at the water tap. The baby inside was turned upside down because of the accident. They lay you down on the big round table when

²¹⁷ Taslima Nasrin, *Meyebela* (Kolkata: Ananda Publishers, 2013), 24.

you were born. You occupied nearly half the table. No one had seen such a large baby before. My mother told me to wrap you in cloth and put a black ‘kajal’ spot on your forehead to prevent any evil eye from falling upon you.”²¹⁸

Although a conceptual framework and broader understanding of her mother’s passivity is missing in the early years recorded by Nasrin in her memoir, the inter-generational exposure to violence and risk behaviour influence the narrative which develops into adulthood. Nasrin observes the social silence, tolerance and inhibition which surround the experiences of women in Bangladesh which range from everyday abuse to cases of grave domestic violence. Most often it is a sense of personal embarrassment, fear of retaliation and economic dependency which cause women to passively endure their domestic fates. However, the concern which lies submerged is the imbalanced power relations between men and women in a conservative Muslim society. As reflected upon earlier, in the period of post-conflict reconstruction, religion emerged as a tool of social integration with the majority of the population in Bangladesh consisting of Muslims.

The establishment of Sharia laws further intensified the social polarisation creating an environment amenable to the state sponsored religious ideology. Nasrin’s writing sharply condemns these religious sanctions and calls for a revision of ethical notions surrounding women’s position in a traditional Islamic society and the conventional understandings of gender norms and sexuality. In Bangladesh, the publication of her works created a storm of debate, more pertinently because it sought to speak of her personal life that exceeded all accepted limits of convention and religious law. Her works were therefore not merely regarded as a project of self formation or delivering testimony but as a deliberate rejection of collective religious notions of morality and piety in women. Traditionalists and clerics claimed that her subject position was opposed to the *ummah* (religious community) despite the relevance of her views within the given social space and time.

In a section of *Meyebela* titled “Ma”, Nasrin goes further back to recollect her childhood as coinciding with a period of resettlement as the family shifted from one place to another due to her father’s profession as a doctor. This period was particularly difficult for her young mother, who was grappling with the knowledge of her husband’s infidelity while she was forced to

²¹⁸Taslima Nasrin, *Meyebela* (Kolkata: Ananda Publishers, 2013), 26-27.

perform the duties, as wife, mother, daughter-in-law (which she was too young to understand at that time). Nasrin writes of the successive birth of her brother and her youngest uncle.

I was two plus two, four years old at that time. My mother, after suffering from two miscarriages successively, was now with child. My father was transferred to Ishwarganj. My mother packed all our belongings and with her three children set off for Ishwarganj. My grandmother had just given birth to her youngest child then. It might sound strange but mother and daughter were very often pregnant at the same time in our houses.²¹⁹

The norms, conditions and practises associated with childbirth and motherhood are communicated through a process of religious socialisation and are acquired through growing up in an orthodox atmosphere. Religion and the consequences of violating its regulations become an essential and irremovable part of women's lives. It is transmitted through oral cultures and memory practises where the woman often ties her embodied experiences of religion to primary processes of socialisation with a group. It may even imply that women adopt a religious and maternal way of life almost automatically and produce a worldview that lacking options, appears self-evident and natural.

Nasrin recollects how her mother had adopted the 'burqa' (veil) at the age of twelve and would not step outside the house without it. There is a distinct process of transformation of experiences into disposition as in Nasrin's case where every subsequent prayer in the morning would validate her sense that the childhood custom was the proper way to begin the day. The memories of childhood are intertwined with religious activity and practise. They become fundamental in women's interactions with the social world and the self.

Nasrin's works have been viewed as objecting to religion's efforts to control and homogenize behaviour but the apparent 'non-naturalness' of desires, which has drawn criticism from conservative quarters, is simply a need to appropriate social spaces for articulation. It relates to attaining a new 'public' relevance and social value. Her writing involves an inclusion of the body while isolating memories of her past. The body has been constantly restricted to the domestic sphere and identified with the preservation of private space by prevailing patterns of religious authority. It works as a legitimate form of power by devaluing the body and imposing a uniform

²¹⁹ Taslima Nasrin, *Meyebela* (Kolkata: Ananda Publishers, 2013), 53.

official rhetoric determined by religion to talk about the woman's body and sexuality, if at all. Nasrin re-imagines the body as an autonomous domain which deals with its own varied and complex impulses instead of being a privileged locus of social and religious control.

Religion acts as a disciplining force in the lives of Muslim women and the effects of religion are ambiguous and contradictory making it difficult to evaluate its reach. In Bangladesh, religion has often been involved with fundamentalist modes of thought and action which are not only patriarchal but also predicated in terms of ethnicity and class. These emerging fundamentalist trends pertain less to the intensity of religious belief but to a social rigidity and a reluctance to bend archaic positions on women's status and class belonging.

Nasrin records her experience of this ethical and religious standpoint in *Meyebela*.

Everyone at my grandmother's house considered the people living in the poor settlement as 'low-class' and those living in big, spacious houses as 'privileged'. When these privileged people would come to visit our house, they would be seated in comfortable chairs in the living room and served freshly prepared 'semiya' (sweet dish) in glass bowls. These privileged people would eat the 'semiya' using spoons and gulp down the water served in tall glasses. They would drink tea from porcelain cups laid out for them with glucose biscuits. When the 'low-class' people came to visit, they were made to sit on the floor outside the kitchen and not offered any 'semiya' or tea and biscuits.

Within seven days of giving Getu's 'low-class' mother a 'talaq' (divorce), Getu's father had married a girl, who was young enough to play hide and seek. On hearing this, my mother said, "Getu's father is the devil. Isn't he satisfied? He's married four times already. The 'talaq' has become a joke. Anyone can do away with his wife by simply uttering those words."

But I wondered why my mother spoke against the laws of Allah when she believed in him so devoutly. Afterall, Allah has given a man supreme right to give his wife a 'talaq' whenever he pleased and to marry as many times as he wanted. One, two, three and even four! They are after all permissible within the limits of the religious law. My mother had

such audacity to criticise them! It is one's duty to follow the law. Did my mother know that she was committing a crime?²²⁰

In Nasrin's memoir, the individual accounts of religious experience and self interpretation of life events interface with socio-historical realities. It evaluates the intersections between gender and religion within the larger narrative of nation and its dominant metaphors. Despite her iconoclasm, Nasrin's memoir reflects the network of familial and relational connections as commonly encountered in memoirs and autobiographies, locating herself within central categories of daughter and sister. Providing an alternative model for a memoir in which her private identification to these categories are used to project and sustain an actual space, Nasrin attempts to uncover contemporary ideologies and culturally relevant issues. The specific features of place and time reveal material conditions and social-political functions of women in present day Bangladesh.

The bourgeois formulas and gendered organisation of contemporary Bangladesh society are substantially expanded with the help of personal experiences which are recorded. The individualism in Nasrin's *Meyebela* serves as a precondition to writing her memoir which critically questions the interdependence between religion, society and the subject to construct a paradigm of explosive self writing. Her detractors would admit that despite the trappings of a sensational story, *Meyebela* provides access to images, categories and idioms by which women's experiences and self-perceptions may be better understood in the context of a traditional Islamic culture such as that present in Bangladesh today.

²²⁰ Taslima Nasrin, *Meyebela* (Kolkata: Ananda Publishers, 2013), 125.

CONCLUSION

The earlier chapters of my thesis have already outlined some of the political developments in Bangladesh post-1971 which have determined the course of the nation's history. My conclusion will attempt to trace some of the more recent developments with respect to the 'birangona' issue and my experiences of field work in Bangladesh. It also contains details from my interviews which discuss the present status of women in Bangladesh after many years of the war.

As part of the legacy of the Liberation War, the Constitution of Bangladesh (1973) envisaged nationalism, secularism, socialism and democracy as the four main interrelated objective principles of the State, but the emergence of a secular and democratic Bangladesh did not signal the end of history. Forces opposed to it, continued to be active and the irony of history was repeated when the fundamentalist Jamaat-e-Islami, an inveterate enemy of the Liberation War, began to share power with the Bangladesh National Party (BNP) after their combined electoral victory in October 2001.

The genocide of 1971 conducted by the West Pakistani army was aided by a small number of political parties particularly the Jamaat-e-Islami and Muslim League and thirty years later an election had bought a coalition to power with two Islamist parties as partners. The more prominent of the two, Jamaat-e-Islami (JI), openly professed the need for an Islamic Revolution and called for an establishment of an Islamic state in Bangladesh.

The political turmoil in Bangladesh during this period was unprecedented in terms of the increasing civil disturbances and violence. The most disturbing aspect of this era was the rise of Islamist militant groups such as Harkat-ul-Jihad al Islami Bangladesh (HUJIB) and the Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB, the Assembly of Holy Warriors) in various parts of the country. These radical groups found a hospitable environment under the four party rule and became notorious for their aggressive Islamist propaganda and wide spread violence. In 2004, the Jagrata Muslim Janata Bangladesh (JMJB) unleashed a reign of terror in Rajshahi and attempted an assassination on the leader of the opposition, Sheikh Hasina at a public meeting. As

the BNP led coalition government was nearing an end in 2006, the country fell into a political crisis with the ruling Awami League (AL) at conflict with the caretaker government and the composition of the Election Commission which they perceived to be allied to the BNP hierarchy.

After a period of increasing political tension and the failure of sustainable democracy, at the end of two years, in December 2008, the general elections in Bangladesh marked a milestone in the country's political history. The Awami League alliance secured a victory with a landslide majority through a fair, violence free election campaign.

The significance of this political change, however, lies in the renewed commitment of the government of Bangladesh to address the issue of justice for war crimes which were committed during 1971. The AL established the International Crimes Tribunal (ICT) in 2010 under the ICT Act 1973, recognizing the need to reconstitute a jurisprudence which would account for the genocide that had been conducted during the Liberation War, particularly the collusion of the Jamaat-i-Islami (JI), and the Muslim League (ML). Soon after Independence in January 1972, the government promulgated the Bangladesh Collaborators (Special Tribunals) Order by a special presidential decree which provided for the prosecution of collaborators before a Special Tribunal. The International Crimes (Tribunal) Act was passed by the Parliament in July, 1973, and was incorporated into the constitution. It was consistent with Sheikh Mujibur's promise to try those who had committed the crimes. The official list of alleged Pakistani prisoners of war published by the government was severely curtailed and justice delayed due to the resistance of the Pakistani government under President Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, who was determined to take action against Bangladeshi civilians and officials who were stranded in Pakistan and prevent Bangladesh's entry into the United Nations.

The deliberations of the ICT was further complicated in 1973 because it was facing difficulty in identifying and establishing the extent of involvement of collaborators in the war crimes. Many among the prisoners of war appealed for an absolute pardon, among the collaborators, many escaped the country crossing the border to India, and yet others continued to live in the country with changed identities. A general amnesty was granted in May and November, 1973, however, it did not extend to those accused of murder, rape, arson and genocide.

Srinath Raghavan in an extensive survey, *A Global History of the Creation of Bangladesh*, records that under the Collaborators Act, between 1972 and 1974, some 37,471 people were arrested and 73 tribunals were set up to try the accused. Over the course of these trials, 22 were awarded death penalties, 68 were sentenced to life imprisonment and 752 received imprisonment for various terms. However, in April 1974, the war crime trials especially for Pakistani military men were abruptly halted due to the tripartite treaty signed by Pakistan, Bangladesh and India, which indicated a movement towards clemency for the 195 Pakistani prisoners of war found guilty in the due process of law. These alleged war criminals were swiftly repatriated to Pakistan along with the others POW's without any further trial. As for the trials of the collaborators, the process continued until the law was repealed in 1975, a few months after Sheikh Mujibur's government was deposed by a military coup.

Military regimes and political parties which came into power later avoided the issue of justice and for many years the new nation conveniently overlooked the unpleasant reality of the Liberation War particularly the crimes against women, in its attempt to stabilize a system of governance and maintain a tenuous peace with collaborators, who often held important offices of state. In February 1992, Shaheed Janani, Jahanara Imam set up the National Coordinating Committee for the Realization of Bangladesh Liberation War Ideals and Trials of War Criminals of 1971, or the Nirmul Committee, calling for a civil society movement which would conduct proceedings at 'Gono Adalots' or People's Court for those suspected of collaborating in Pakistan's war efforts. The details of Jahanara Imam's contribution and the relative success of the Nirmul Committee have already been discussed in the previous chapters.

The more recent developments are of immediate interest because it indicates a continuing legal and public discourse on the Liberation War in Bangladesh despite the long years which have elapsed since 1971. The counter discourse to the issue of justice and public recovery is also important since it reveals the complex history of a nation born out of conflict and the diverse opinions of those who believe that the process is at an end and needs no further discussion. In other words carved out of an older nation in an era of post-colonialism, Bangladesh faces more acute problems related to a growing population, a fledgling economy and limited opportunities in employment, industry, public services and health which many agree are challenges that the country must overcome before it is involved with the controversies of the past.

During my visit to Bangladesh, it was surprising how frequently the term ‘controversial’ occurred in my interviews with people on the issue of justice with respect to the war crimes of collaborators within the country. The question about the collaborators, is as one student at Dhaka University pointed out to me ‘bitorkito’ or debatable, although, as recently as February, 2013, the sentencing of Jamaat-e-Islami leader, Abdul Qader Mollah to life imprisonment (later changed to death penalty by the Supreme Court) on charges of collaboration had been backed by an overwhelming majority of Bangladeshi citizens and unleashed a series of events with serious consequences. I did not probe further into what exactly he implied by ‘debatable’, but I sensed that he meant there were many others who had evaded justice and those cases under review by the jury were simply too prominent to neglect.

While there is considerable support among Bangladeshis for the trials of the perpetrators of crimes against humanity in 1971, there is also a tacit understanding that these issues are often drawn into political debates and become mired with controversy and corruption. The process of justice is delayed endlessly and the perpetrators often find ways to seek legal protection. Some of my interviewees mentioned the possibility of the accused misrepresenting his crimes or underplaying his involvement as a means of bypassing harsh punitive measures. The contentious political environment makes any legal case a battleground for accusations and counter accusations. To put it more succinctly, the implementation of justice if delayed, is often, a more grievous offence than the crime itself, but such a claim begs the question, that is it not better than the lack of any legal action or judicial activism in the first place?

Following the conviction of Abdul Qader Mollah, there were a number of trials and landmark judgements passed by the Supreme Court, sentencing those found guilty of war crimes in Bangladesh. Delwar Hossain Sayeedi was sentenced to death on 28th February, 2013, although his sentence was reduced to ‘imprisonment till death’ in 2014, Kamaruazzaman, who was sentenced on 9th May 2013 was executed on 15th July, 2015, Ali Ahsan Mojaheed was sentenced on 17th July, 2013 and executed on 22nd November, 2015, Salahuddin Quader Chowdhury – then a BNP MP – was sentenced to death on 1st October, 2013 and also executed on 22nd November, 2015. These decisions were lauded by members of the Bangladeshi civil society and the international community despite the spate of violence perpetrated by opposition political activists

in 2013. There may be more such cases heard in the future since the investigations into the war of 1971 are still ongoing

While discussing these issues in the course of my interview, Mrs. Helen Rozario, a 76 year old retired teacher, mentioned that the “Law cannot be trusted”. I believe what she meant was that the judicial framework is not sufficient in terms of uncovering the kind of crimes that were committed during the Liberation War. The legal jargon of truth and reconciliation committees and court trials cannot possibly establish the wide range of experiences undergone by women during those nine months, not only the special category of ‘birangonas’, but women civilians and refugees, whose lives were equally affected by the event.

My research remains limited, in that it does not record or access any personally conducted interview of the ‘birangonas’, who I speak of extensively in my thesis. However, the contributions of my interviewees, Mohammad Kamran Choudhury and Helen Rozario have certainly enriched my understanding of the lived experiences of women during the war and the complexities which accompany the commemoration of the ‘birangona’.

Helen’s description of the atmosphere of fear and doubt that prevailed over Dhaka during the months of the war was striking. The fear that a neighbor was collaborating with the army, divulging details about the household which would often lead to open looting or worse, an attack on the family, controlled the lives of many in the city, who did not have any refuge in the countryside. Helen recounts that it was common for women to be lifted out of their houses, particularly those which did not have a man in the house, and to be returned a day or two later. Most families which had young wives or daughters would be terrified of unexpected calls, which were customary on the part of the military. Some were even wary of sheltering members of the Mukti Bahini since one could not determine whether the stranger was friend or foe.

For most part, Helen would travel back and forth from her house in Dhaka to her relative’s house located in an interior village in Mymensingh district (where a significant percentage of the minority community still lives), depending on the conditions of the war. She remembered the acute shortage of food in the city during the military occupation and the sudden powercuts which would last days at a stretch. The urban middle classes mostly remained trapped in their houses

fearing for their lives and honour, but there was a great sense of unity, in terms of helping each other with supplies and medicine.

For civilians like her, there was the lurking danger of rape and systematic abuse, separation from husbands and children. The condition was particularly precarious for her Hindu neighbours. Helen's remark served as an invitation for a deeper reflection on the sexual economies of war and their dispersal into other forms of violence, which many women were forced to live with during this period. It is impossible, perhaps even unsound, to seek redressal for the everyday violence inflicted on women during a period of conflict, but certainly these local contexts, these micro-histories and memories of war require a closer examination and the gendered nature of this violence must be understood in terms of the different values that it carried and the different degrees of its application. My interviews enabled me to understand that there is no universality of women's experiences in war and that my subjective position as a researcher, the woman I was interviewing, and the readers must necessarily engage in a dialogic relationship in order to construct an alternative and more inclusive account of history than the one currently in circulation.

Helen has worked for over 25 years as a teacher and then, principal of St. Patrick's Grammar School, one of the few notable missionary schools in Dhaka, she is also engaged with various charitable causes. She received the 'jatiyo puroshkar' or national award for excellence in teaching in 2014 from the Honourable Prime Minister, Sheikh Hasina. Helen has been a member of the Intermediate and Secondary Education Board, the Ministry of Education, Dhaka for many years now and has served at the National Curriculum and Text Book Board, Dhaka (NCTB). She has been instrumental in shaping the curriculum for secondary and higher educational institutions. As a student of Dhaka University, she was an eyewitness to the violence against students during Operation Searchlight leading up to the fateful night of 25th March. She vividly recalls the months of peaceful protest, the patrolling of the streets by the military and police, and the reports of an approaching crisis circulated through radio and other clandestine publications within the university.

Helen mentions that she could not have anticipated that the attack would be so brutal and merciless although upon warning she had stayed home for the week. Most of the girls in the hostels had left for their home, except a few. The university premises were strictly monitored

although there were reports of unrest occasionally. Her late husband, also an educationalist, was one of the many arrested during this period on suspicion of involvement but restored to his family later. Helen did not mention the details of the interrogation except that he was asked about his role in the student movement which was at its peak since January. Though, she remembers the tense night she spent with her infant waiting for him to return. He returned after two days and the family shifted to Mymensingh for a while before returning to Dhaka.

Among other things, I asked Helen about the current education system in Bangladesh and how school textbooks represent the Liberation War of 1971 to the new generation of students. Helen informed me that the paucity of primary information provided to students about the birth of their nation is dismal considering the fact that history is an important subject in schools. In English medium schools, the curriculum places an emphasis upon world history, with a special focus on European history in order to meet the international benchmarks. This did not surprise me considering the fact that a similar bias may be discerned in the history textbooks prescribed in schools across India. However, according to Helen, the situation is more problematic because the English school curriculums are increasingly overlooking the study of the Bangladesh Liberation War as a part of mainstream history and are eager to include it as a part of the vernacular Bengali syllabi.

At the college level, the educational curriculum provides an option between general history and Islamic history and most students even the Hindus choose Islamic history because it is a shorter course. The government is making attempts to reteach history and she told me that the National University in Gazipur has introduced a new course on the History of the Emergence of Bangladesh with a focus on the Liberation War. There are over 2000 colleges affiliated to the university so BA and BSc courses now have this subject as a compulsory part of their syllabi. Dhaka University also has a Centre for Genocide Studies, which promotes new research in this discipline, but at the primary and secondary level there is almost a vacuum in terms of history of the Liberation War. Thus, while the war is in many ways foundational to the Bangladeshi identity, the gendered violence of the genocide remains unexplored.

While students are encouraged to celebrate ‘Bhasha Dibosh’ (Language Movement Day) in schools with special programmes organized by the government and broadcast on national television in memory of martyrs and war heroes, the school curriculum does not promote a

rigorous knowledge of the Liberation War. Last year, Helen remembers there was an interview broadcast on television, where a few ‘birangonas’ shared their stories of the conflict. However, most students recognize the war efforts as a victory of the glorious Mukti Bahini and Banga Bandhu over the Pakistani military forces. The public memory of the war, particularly that of the younger generation is severely compromised, as Helen explains how most literary and visual representations of the Liberation War are associated with the sacrifices or accomplishments of the sons of the soil who won independence for the Bengali ‘jaati’ or community. The schoolchildren are often taken to the Liberation War Museum almost as a pedagogical mission but their understanding of the genocide remains restricted to the facts of nation formation.

My second interviewee, Mr. Mohammad Kamran Choudhury is a well known Bangladeshi writer and social activist. He is the founder of the Social Reconstruction Action, a non-profit organization promoting social and educational work. He is also the author of numerous articles, anthologies of poems and books on the Liberation War. His latest book, *Mukti Juddher Bideshi Bondhu* (Foreign Friends in the Liberation War) was published in September, 2019. He has won the Haji Mohammad Mohsin Award in 2014, Kabyo Kotha Shahitya Award in 2015, Joy Bangla Shahitya Award in 2017 and Bangladesh Poet and Writers Forum Award in 2019.

Mr. Choudhury mentioned how the memory of the Liberation War lingers on in the collective life of the nation through the popular iconography and evocation of Banga Bandhu, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in all public discussions, forums and organizations. He outlined Banga Bandhu’s contribution to the Liberation struggle at length and with great academic perspicuity. Mr. Choudhury’s comment reminded me of the numerous images of Banga Bandhu I had seen on the streets and buildings of Dhaka, one which I had dismissed simply as a form of political propaganda on the part of the ruling Awami League government led by his daughter. In fact, shops, hotels and private offices also bore decorative portraits of the father of the nation, quite unlike anything I have seen in India. The memory of the war is ever present and the Sheikh Mujib-centric commemoration of the war indicates an established hegemonic ideology which is predominantly masculine. Indeed the commemoration of the war, one which occurs on a grand scale in the week of Bangladesh’s Independence Day, clearly exhibits that even at present the domain of sovereignty and nationalism are inhabited by men. In terms of historiography as well, there is undoubtedly a privileging of male voices which attempt to negotiate a position of power

and dominance from their positions of subalternity within the colonial context and write a nationalist history of emancipation.

Mr. Choudhury made an interesting observation during his interview when asked about the afterlife of the ‘birangona’ issue and the recent court trials of collaborators. He mentioned that the history of the ‘birangona’ is now exhausted and the ongoing process of legal jurisprudence has increasingly become a form of compensation that the state provides itself in order to recover from the disturbing memory of its own shortcomings. He explained that the attempts at legal reparation are often strategies used by the ruling government to either bring down the BNP opposition for its lack of political activism in the earlier decade or to elevate its own stature as the legacy bearers of the Mujib regime.

According to Mr. Choudhury these trials achieve nothing more than directing the attention of the public from more grave concerns such as poverty, lack of infrastructural development in the country and political ineptitude to the sensationalism of the court cases. It was surprising to hear Mr. Choudhury say that it is all a part of a political game. Mr. Choudhury established that most of the men convicted in recent years had been known for their history of association with the opposition but the list of collaborators is in no way conclusive. In addition, Mr. Choudhury suggested that the current imprisonment of Mrs. Khaleda Zia, former Prime Minister and leader of the BNP may also be understood as a kind of political conspiracy to weaken the claim of the veteran leader to her right in the democracy. Mrs. Khaleda Zia has been serving a 17 year prison term in two graft cases since February 8, 2018 and if reports are to be believed has been suffering from acute health related issues. However, the ailing 74 year old leader has not been allowed to consult her doctors in London and has been provided inadequate health care facilities to further aggravate her condition.

I consulted a few daily newspapers and current affairs magazines to find an article published by *India Today* on 5th December, 2019, reporting that:

“With authorities in Bangladesh failing to submit the medical report of jailed former Prime Minister, Khaleda Zia, Supreme Court on Thursday deferred the hearing of her bail application...Earlier on November 28, the court had asked the medical board formed at Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Medical University (BSMMU) for her treatment to submit the report.

Zia, the chairperson of Bangladesh Nationalist Party, has been receiving treatment at the BSMMU since April.”²²¹

Mr. Choudhury insisted that the question of the ‘birangona’ is a subject of intrigue and in the absence of these ‘real women’ it becomes prone to overt politicization and misrepresentation. The Jamaat-e-Islami, considered the chief collaborators in the Liberation War has been disbanded as a party and is not politically active in Bangladesh. There is certainly a shift towards adopting Islamic conventions in Bangladesh, but the Jamaat and other radical groups charged for their collaborative efforts during the war have been discredited and publicly ostracized. The need of the hour, according to Mr. Choudhury is to focus on the economic development of women in Bangladesh and to improve their education and quality of living. He mentioned the Gender Quality Action Learning (GQAL), an initiative to advance women’s empowerment and gender equality by BRAC, which began as a small scale relief and rehabilitation project for returning war refugees after the Liberation War of 1971, and has now grown into an international organization.

I wondered how the question about justice for ‘birangonas’ could produce such a series of inter-related political observations but it is clearly the kind of counter-discourse that must be taken into consideration. The issue of justice is indeed uncomfortable and complex and I couldn’t agree more with Mr. Choudhury that the victims as well as the perpetrators are perhaps long ‘gone’. Yet, what troubles me is the distortion of memory which is likely to occur if the ‘birangona’ stories are forgotten or dismissed as outdated. Certainly, many of these women have been rehabilitated and do not seek recognition or compensation but while the experience of public testimony can admittedly be painful, there may be others such as Ferdousi Priyabhashini who would not avoid the ‘shame’ of identification. Perhaps the trial and sentencing of collaborators enables the unnamed ‘birangonas’ and other unidentified victims suffering from the personal trauma of having lost a loved one through violence to find some form of reconciliation even in their silence and a way of coping with a guilt-ridden sub consciousness which conditions the raped woman and survivors to think that it was in a way their fault.

²²¹ Press Trust of India, “Bangladesh top court defers Khaleda Zia’s bail hearing,” *India Today*, December 5, 2019, <https://www.indiatoday.in/world/story/bangladesh-top-court-defers-khaleda-zia-s-bail-hearing-1625570-2019-12-05>

The unique vantage points from which these two interviews were offered demonstrated the political, experiential and representational complexities of issues surrounding the subject and the difficult process of memorializing the role of women during the war at present.

I visited the Liberation War Museum in Dhaka on two occasions during my visit to Bangladesh in December, 2019. I realized that a great deal of effort had been put in collecting articles and documents of historical significance and authenticating them. The architecture and maintenance of the new museum located at Agargaon is impressive but what is more worthwhile is the genuine effort to educate the public about the atrocities committed against Bengalis during the war. The display is divided into six sections. Gallery 1 displays archeological material and evidence of the history and culture of Bengal from 500 B.C. to the Mughal period and finally the colonial era. Gallery 2 archives photographs and documents of Bengal's involvement in the national politics of India, the Partition of 1947, and the growth of the Bengali identity from 1947-1971. This gallery also houses various personal objects used by Banga Bandhu, Mujibur Rahman, and represents the involvement of the youth of Bengal in the Student Protest and the Language Movement Protest. Gallery 3 depicts the events leading up to the war, the mass migration of refugees to India, the imprisonment of Banga Bandhu in Pakistan and the declaration of Independence.

Gallery 4 contains images of freedom fighters, women activists, war heroes and civilians who participated in the war and displays their personal belongings in the form of diaries, letters and other memorabilia. Gallery 5 features the armed combat and advance of the Mukti Bahini, the devastation caused by the war, images of the ruined country and its people, and most importantly the role of the collaborators within the country in conducting the massacre. It also displays the international relief effort and aid provided by the Missionaries of Charity and other organizations. Finally, Gallery 6 shows the attack on the intelligentsia, the discovery of mass graves in Mirpur, Dhaka, the intervention of the Indian army, and the final victory.

The national archive is intended to be both about memory and historical understanding and also aimed at evoking emotional, affective responses. The mural at the entrance which overlooks the eternal flame bears the inscription, "Witness is the blood soaked soil of Bengal so will the moon and stars testify we have not forgotten memories of martyrs. We shall forget nothing at all." If we consider the memorial function of the museum, we must acknowledge that it is not

only a repository of public memory but a space of healing and repair. In this way, it is a form of symbolic reparation that seeks to remember the martyrs and victims and to help heal and repair the community. But the museum is largely concerned with preserving a material culture, by collecting documents, photographs, physical evidence in a practical attempt to crystallize the memory of the war. Like the Yad Vashem museum in Israel, the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum in Cambodia and Kigali Memorial centre in Rwanda, it serves as a representational site of genocide in Bangladesh and is devoted even to the moral purpose of exposing the atrocities committed against mankind lest the future forgets.

The Liberation Museum, however, has become metonymic with the triumph of the nation and sacrifices of its war heroes, endorsing a dominant version of the past from a male perspective. While the Liberation Museum attempts to remember the lives of martyrs and the nationalist struggle of the Bengali community which suffered due to the genocide, it fails to provide a more balanced, critical and reflective telling of the past by including the stories of women or groups which were silenced or left behind. Gallery 5 at the museum contains gruesome photographs of raped women but there is no evidence of the history of these 'birangonas'. The representation of women's experiences is limited to the contributions of Begum Sufia Kamal, poet, Meherunnessa and prominent members of the 'Nari Bahini' (women's army) such as Shirin Banu, Farquan Begum, Alamtaj Begum, Karuna Begum, Shobha Rani, Bithika Biswas. Together, they form the human face of the conflict that women had to endure, while the 'birangona' is simply reduced to sparse images of brutalized bodies. The displayed black and white photographs of raped women occupy sections of the wall and stand out starkly in the midst of images of military and political events or the general public in states of fear and despair.

I could only trace three such images which explicitly reference or exhibit the condition of the raped women in the six aesthetically designed galleries filled with digital photographs and films. The meanings and values seemed to be constructed within a patriarchal framework with a special need for selective remembering. This discrepancy leads to the obvious conclusion that if the museum upholds the authenticity of images and the accuracy of presented facts, then the exclusion of the images and experiences of women can only indicate the aim to reinforce a national narrative which symbolically associates the tragedy of genocide to the nation at large and significantly underplays the violence against women. While the sexual violence against

women is implicit within the paradigm of memorialization, perhaps the naked body of the raped woman causes a sense of public discomfort and therefore must be avoided. I found myself surrounded by a few curious glances as I stood for a while looking at a photograph of a raped woman, whose clothes had been ripped off, revealing her breasts and torso.

The story of the nation's loss is narrativized at the war museum through evidence of atrocities committed by the enemy and the suffering of the people as a collective. While it enables a form of social cohesion, the erasure of the experiences of women projects a masculine apparatus of story-telling and leads to the destruction of smaller mnemonic cultures.

The task of researching the lives of 'birangonas' and other women who suffered in the course of the Bangladesh Liberation War is daunting and fraught with difficulty because it yields a variety of interpretations and a range of contested identities. Even under less contentious circumstances, using their testimonies to define identity or incite analysis and discussion can be difficult or counterproductive. It is impossible to explore exhaustively the many lived experiences of women at this critical moment in the history of Bangladesh since much of the early documentation remains in the grip of a cultural hegemony providing a homogenous basis for national identity and the voices of these women have often been silenced in order to create a common narrative. Reading the existing body of memoirs, therefore, may appear merely an academic exercise which can only produce scholastic results. Yet, these narratives must be recognized for their intrinsic worth as evidences that such marginal communities existed and were denied their historical significance since they did not 'fit in' with the shared knowledge and practice, ritual and symbolism of the state.

Further, these memoirs indicate the scope for further research because although few in number, the archive can be expanded by including more recent testimonies of women, who lived through this conflict. There are many such testimonies which can be collected to contribute to this living archive which has the capacity to revise and challenge the country's history and attempts at truth telling. By remembering the complexities of a traumatic past, these testimonies can reform the discursive practices of writing history leading to a more inclusive approach and stimulate dialogue on pressing social issues surrounding women in the country today which trace their roots to the birth of the nation.

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