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Ethical Futures: History Making and Representation of Narratives of Sexual Violence of the Bangladesh War of 1971

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This article is based on my fourteen month fieldwork in Bangladesh on the public memories of sexual violence of 1971 undertaken between 1997-1998 and between 2002-2003. My research analyzes the processes of documentation of the narratives of sexual violence of the Bangladesh War of 1971 and the circulation of testimonies of rape among nine survivors of sexual violence, their families and communities, the left-liberal civil society, different governments and state actors, within the imaginary of the nation, the aesthetic of middle class sensibility within the region, as well as in the commodity forms through a range of oral accounts (interviews, discussion, observation, rumours and gossip) and documentary projects, oral histories, press, visual and literary texts. It attempts to point out the ethical futures that are envisaged by the left-liberal community in Bangladesh who are engaged in the process of ‘correcting’ distorted histories of 1971.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which emerged in 1948, was aimed to be a moral blueprint, to allow the international community to question the private affairs of the state and to hold them accountable to international human rights standards. More recently the movement for women’s human rights which has contested the invisibility of both gender based human rights abuses and women’s perspectives on human rights in international agendas has been crystallised around the second World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna in 1993. This initiative culminated three years later in the Global Tribunal on Accountability for Women’s Human Rights, which took place on 1st September 1995 at the NGO Forum, held as part of the Fourth World Conference on Women, in Beijing. The Beijing Tribunal provided a public venue to hear women’s voices, to document women’s human rights violations and to foster a political climate in which such abuses would no longer be tolerated. The Beijing Platform for Action reasserted ‘the universal and holistic nature of women’s human rights’ (Bunch and Reilly, 1994) and governments undertook to pursue and punish as war criminals the perpetrators of rape and sexual violence against women and girls in situation of armed

conflict. It acknowledged that systematic rape during armed conflict is a war crime and in some cases a crime against humanity. To achieve this end not only was it enough to present testimonies of violations of human rights, but what was emphasised was the need to prepare a “summary of accountability” that identified specific human rights agreements, laws and standards that had been violated; outlined the political and legal strategies that had been utilised or had been planned for the future and to incorporate concrete strategies and recommendations for demanding and achieving accountability for the human rights violations described in the testimony.

The historical trajectory of Bangladesh, within which the history of sexual violence is articulated, is a witness to varied ruptured pasts, multilayered negotiation of one’s identity. Thirty eight years after its independence, the issues of genocide and rape of the Bangladesh war of 1971 still remains unresolved and the Bangladeshi left-liberal networks are actively seeking to redress that injustice through their demand for the trial of war-time collaborators. This article attempts to highlight the ethical futures that are envisaged by the left-liberal community in Bangladesh who are engaged in the process of ‘correcting’ distorted histories of 1971. It also attempts to map out the context within which the renarrativization of accounts of sexual violence of 1971 emerged in Bangladesh in the 1990s and among various other narratives highlight one such survivor, Champa’s, ‘story’. This article explores the processes through which the history of rape during 1971 and raped girls and womenⁱⁱ are being remembered and their experiences are transformed into narratives. By calling into question the politics of representing narratives of sexual violence it enables a reconceptualization of oral history as a methodological tool for representing such narratives. The article explores the link between the documentation of narratives of sexual violence with the national contingency of a moral economy of history making and the global language of the ‘summary of accountability’ which has become a necessity to identify sexual violence against women as a war crime. In trying to accommodate narratives of sexual violence to the hybrid language of global accountability and national contingency of history making, the complexity and consequences of sexual violence among women embodying the subjects of that history is lost.

Histories of Rape after 1971

In 1972, the Bangladeshi state under Sheikh Mujib adopted a policy to accord a new visibility to the 200,000 women raped during *Muktijuddho* by eulogising them as *birangonas* (war heroines), which coincided with a new genre of public persuasive rhetoric and was an attempt to reinstate them in marriage and reduce social ostracism. A Relief and Rehabilitation Board was set up by the government in Bangladesh for the purpose of setting up Rehabilitation Centres throughout the country in order to provide relief and rehabilitation, set up abortion clinics, facilitate marriages of the female

survivors, and provide vocational training to ‘war-affected’ women, i.e. primarily women who had been raped during the war (Mookherjee 2007).

The issue of rape during the war was widely reported in the press from December 1971, until mid 1973 after which the *birangonas* received a token mention in the State speeches as the ‘200,000 mothers and sisters’ and was relegated to oblivion in Bangladeshi government and journalistic consciousness. However the history of rape remained a topic of literary and visual media through the last thirty-seven years in Bangladesh thereby ensuring that the raped woman endured as an iconic figure. The issue arose again on 28th March 1992 with the publication of the photograph of Rohima, Kajoli and Moynaⁱⁱⁱ - three landless, poor war-heroines from Enayetpur (a village in western Bangladesh) on the front-page of leading newspapers (*Bhorer Kagoj* 27/3/92; *Doinik Jonokontho* 28/3/92) (Mookherjee 2006). This emerged in the context of the increasing importance of the memories of 1971 in the politics of the 1990s in Bangladesh, particularly in relation to the trial of collaborators like Gholam Azum who was the head of the right wing Islamicist party *Jamaat-e-Islami* (JMI) and who had been politically reinstated by fifteen years of military rule. Also with the international recognition of rape as a war crime, it has become necessary in the 1990s to document histories of sexual violation of 1971 so as to contribute to the evidentiary pool in Bangladesh against the collaborators.

Telling Champa’s ‘Story’

I came to know about Champa from a newspaper article in *Bhorer Kagoj* (13/5/98) with the headline ‘*Birangona* Champa in the Mental Hospital’ with a picture of a woman who seemed to be in her mid 40s. The report in the article follows:

“By losing her chastity for the sake of Liberation, Champa has led a life of imprisonment for the last two decades in the Pabna Mental Hospital. In the midst of the chaos of the war in 1971, 13-year-old Champa strayed off and lost her parents. When she was searching for everyone, then the Pakistani army took her to a camp. There along with a few other imprisoned women Champa was subjected to brutal torture (i.e. rape) by the Pakistani soldiers. After being raped continuously she lost her mental stability. At the end of September 1971, the liberation fighters took over the camp and freed the imprisoned *birangonas*. Champa bearing the marks of rape on her body was then unconscious. After independence Champa was under medical treatment for two years in the Women’s Rehabilitation Centre in Dhaka. Since this treatment did not cure her, the matron of the Rehabilitation Centre Meera Choudhuri admitted Champa in the Pabna Mental Hospital.

In the Register of the hospital, the date of admission of Champa is 22nd October 1972. Diagnosed as schizophrenic, Champa was cured within six months. It was also written

in the hospital register that most probably the Pakistani army raped her. Letters were sent many times to her father Abdul Gani, resident of Barisal, so as to ask him to take her back to her family. Having received no reply from him, the hospital authorities gave up any chance of returning Champa back to her family. In all these years since she has been cured, Champa has been working as an attendant of the patients in the hospital. Champa also reminiscences of her childhood and memories of her family are still vivid. When the journalist writing the report asked about her imprisoned life in the Pakistani camp her eyes brimmed with tears and she said she would not say anything.’

In the article the journalist says that Champa wanted to spend the rest of her life in the Mental Hospital. At the same time the journalist felt that Champa should be ‘freed’ and attempts have been made by *Manobadhikar Bastobayon Songshtha* (MBS from now on meaning Organisation for the Realisation of Human Rights) to take Champa to Dhaka. Another article was written in *Bhorer Kagoj* on 16th June 1998, after Champa had already been brought to Dhaka by MBS. The article also narrated how Champa had suddenly decided to stay in the Hospital and declined to go to Dhaka when the members of MBS came to take her. She agreed to go finally on the assurance that she would be allowed to come back to the Hospital if she did not like being in Dhaka. I met Champa on 1st June 1998 around two weeks after the first article was written and in the duration between the publications of the two articles. The Pabna Mental Hospital is one of the main mental asylums in Bangladesh and in recent years the press has critically reported about its appalling facilities and infrastructure, its laying off of staffs and dismissal of patients who were not totally cured.

On reaching the Hospital, the Director of the hospital introduced me to a Matron and the latter asked me to wait in an annex room for Champa. She refused to meet me initially as she thought that I was somebody from Dhaka and came into the room muttering that she would not leave and does not want to leave. When I told her that I had come to just talk to her and not take her to Dhaka she was reassured and even wanted to show me around the wards and meet some of the patients who were her friends.

She spoke clearly and articulately and said she does not know how she ended up in the Mental Hospital and had memories of her times in the village as a young girl and blurred memories of the beginning of *gondogol* (chaos meaning the war of 1971). As she said this her eyes welled up with tears, her hands gripped my hands as we sat in silence, in tears. She gesticulated in silence with her hand over her body and mouthed that too much had happened to her. I held onto her hand for a long time and gave her a hug. Champa reiterated that either she wanted to return to her family in the village or she wanted to continue working in the Mental Hospital. Rather than stitching clothes, doing craftwork or looking after other people’s children in Dhaka as an *ayah*, she emphasized that she would

rather continue working in the Hospital and not go away to an unfamiliar environment in Dhaka away from all the people she had to come to know. She reiterated that the Mental Hospital had become her home, she had friends here and people cared for her there. Coincidentally, I met the journalist who wrote the article in Pabna town. He confirmed he had not given an accurate account of Champa's narrative, had not met her, and his report was based on accounts given by MBS about Champa's condition.

What I want to show in this article is instead of the reporter's press articles exploring Champa's 'blank-out' of the events of 1971, which might provide understanding of how memories are contained through the acts of forgetting, or what function acts of forgetting may encode, the reader is instead given a clean, gory description of sexual violation in Pakistani army camps. Champa's tears, our gripped hands, her silent gesticulation, our silence spoke louder and more poignantly than words or any detailed narrative of sexual violence of 1971. The objective thereby becomes the need to stage a vision of an authentic oppressed, violated woman. The horrifying genre adopted in the description of sexual violence precisely links Champa with 'marks' that characterise her and make her a 'case'. Champa's relentless reiteration that she wanted to go back to the village or continue working in the hospital and not go to Dhaka, and the authorities' lack of engagement with her wishes should be comprehended in the context of the hospital's lack of funds, and attempts to layoff staff and dismiss patients in order to reduce operating costs.

The double horrifying genre of sexual violence by the Pakistani army and its consequential life spent in an 'oppressive' institution precisely provides the accountability factor necessary for identifying rape as a war crime globally for Bangladesh. It also enables the location of causality of the second horrifying genre in the first along with an emphasis on her dislocation from her family i.e. since Champa was raped by the Pakistani army, she was not taken back into her family and as a result spent an oppressive life in a Mental Hospital. I am critical of this framework of understanding wartime rape as it does not show how women who faced this violence have lived with this violence in their everyday.

The article should not be read as a negation of the violence of sexual violence of 1971. This critique of the process of documenting narratives of sexual violence of 1971 however needs to be distinguished from the various recent, revisionist deniers of Bangladesh's *anyway* unacknowledged genocidal history. This critique of the politics of memory would be easily read and appropriated by these recent deniers as 'political correctness' and have recently argued that 'nothing happened in Bangladesh.'^{iv} My work starts where the testimonial forms end to explore how private pain of wartime rape is made part of the public memory and adapted to human right frameworks. This does not negate the events of historical injury which itself generated these narratives within various contexts. There is no doubt that East Pakistani women were raped by the Pakistani army and their local

collaborators as evidenced through the research I conducted with women who were violently raped during the war. Many other scholars within Bangladesh are also addressing this issue by focusing on the rape and killing of women and men (who are deemed to be part of the collaborator Bihari community) by the Liberation fighters which seek to rupture the nationalist narrative. Nonetheless none of these works can deny the encounters of rape among their informants and friends as evidenced through long term, detailed fieldwork.

The article, argues that in trying to accommodate personal narratives of sexual violence to the hybrid language of global accountability and national contingency of history-making, the complexity and consequences of sexual violence among women embodying the subjects of that history is lost. While it is important for the left-liberal community to aspire and aim for their ethical future, at the same time **it is important that when they represent the narratives of sexual violence they should reflect first and foremost the desires and wishes of the women whose narratives are being highlighted instead of a macro, national objective. Otherwise a disjunction would arise between this macro narrative and the personal lives embodied by the narratives, which are then often reduced and compromised to conform to this macro narrative.** The zeal to document untold histories should not make researchers and activists lose sight of the complexity and consequences of the war-time and post war-time encounters of women who were raped during this war. What constitutes these narratives of rape should not be deductively pre-determined and should include the various nuances of experiences as expressed by the women concerned. As a result, a dual ethical future emerges that is able to include both the micro-level nuances of personal experience and the macro-level aspirations of national memory and justice.

Acknowledgement

Version of this paper appeared on the activist website Drishtipat (<http://www.drishtipat.org/1971>), as part of its successful fundraising programme for women raped during 1971 titled 'Women and War'.

Notes

ⁱ This research project went through ethical interrogations within the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), London University. The arguments I am making in the article addresses the ethical questions pertinent to the research project rather than a bureaucratic, institutional checklist which is predominantly how 'ethics' is increasingly understood today.

ⁱⁱ Hence forth when I refer to women raped, it covers both women and girls.

ⁱⁱⁱ Respecting the sensitiveness of the materials, some names have been changed to ensure anonymity.

^{iv} For a further discussion of this debate see Mookherjee (2006b, 2007b).

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