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# Who is speaking? co-option, authority, and envisioning the nation: women and narratives of sexual violence in conflict

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This article presents an investigation of the forces of authority and co-option surrounding the documentation of violence and specifically sexual violence against women in conflict, and examines the representation of survivors in media and academic sources. The first section focuses on the use of oral testimony in the conflicts in East Pakistan/Bangladesh in 1971 and the disintegration of Yugoslavia in the 1990s, and how survivors' narratives are interpreted and communicated. It then goes on to examine the representation of violence against women in the Bangladesh conflict in a variety of South Asian newspaper sources in the years immediately following 1971. This is then further explored in the final section where these media discourses display the co-opting of women's experiences into discourses of nation-building and state legitimacy in Bangladesh. The article concludes that the sources examined reflect a tendency for narratives of sexual violence in conflict to be co-opted or otherwise 'used' for secondary political purposes by the media, the state and even academic researchers, such that the women survivors retain little authority over the communication of their 'history' and its utilisation.

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What is known in the state it created as the ‘Bangladesh War of Liberation’ has been described as part of a ‘long partition’ (Vazira Zamindar quoted in D’Costa 2011: 54). The 1971 conflict has become emblematic of the continuing construction and division of communal and national identities on the Indian subcontinent since 1947. In the formation of a Bangladeshi national narrative, the role of women was to undergo considerable changes, from wartime constructions of (male) honour that inflicted extreme violence on women, to post-conflict nationalist dialogues that attempted to re-position the ‘violated’ woman into the new nation.

Statistical data relating to violence against women in the conflict, which ran from 26<sup>th</sup> March – 16<sup>th</sup> December 1971, is highly debated. The most generally accepted figures are those cited by Susan Brownmiller in her 1975 study: 200,000 women raped by the Pakistan Army, resulting in 25,000 ‘unwanted’ pregnancies (Brownmiller 1975: 79). The political response of the new Awami League government of Bangladesh - under the leadership of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman - was not to conceal this violence despite cultural taboos surrounding rape victims, but to name the women ‘*Birangona*’ (‘war heroine’) and begin a programme of ‘Rehabilitation’ to integrate them into society. The programme

aimed to persuade men to take back their ‘dishonoured’ wives and to ‘marry off’ single women, meanwhile teaching these women skills such as sewing and office work, that would enable them to participate in the economic reconstruction of the country (Debnath 2009). While this discourse may have attempted to improve conditions for the women and alleviate the ‘shame’ of their experiences in the conflict, it also created a uniform script that dominated ‘war heroines’ as ‘docile subjects’ (Rabinow 1986), in a programme of integration; their actions tied inextricably to the nation-building discourse.

### *Outline*

The first section will explore the use of oral testimony as a historical source; often one of the only ways that marginalised historical narratives can be documented. This investigation will approach women’s experiences in conflict and how they are recorded, represented, and used. To provide an element of comparison with other conflicts, testimonies from the breakup of the former Yugoslavia will be examined alongside those of Bangladesh.

In comparing two texts that utilise testimonials - Amita Malik’s 1972 book *The Year of the Vulture*, and Catharine MacKinnon’s 1994 article ‘Turning Rape into Pornography: Postmodern Genocide’ - this study will focus on how authorial power is

exerted over survivors' narratives of sexual violence, and how voices are co-opted and used by these authors.

The second section will focus on the discourses surrounding 'war heroines' in the years immediately following independence, by examining articles from Bangladeshi English language newspapers, with some comparative examples from wider South Asian and world press sources. The imposition of a paternalist state authority created narrow avenues in which violence against women in 1971 could be imagined, discussed and reconciled; this often restricted and moulded women's voices.

The purpose of examining authorial power over testimonies alongside broader assertions of authority by the state over 'war heroines' is to exemplify that similar structures of narrative appropriation and restriction of voices occur in both instances. These linkages between different forms of assertions of power form the central preoccupation of this study. In the third section this analysis will be extended to include the co-option of women's narratives into a communal experience of suffering for the realisation of Bengali nationalism in 1971, and the decades preceding it. This considers how women's experiences are included in arch-narratives of nation building.

Much historical debate concerning the 1971 conflict arises from the unavailability of accurate figures for those killed, and centres

on the question of 'genocidal' intent towards Bengalis by the Pakistan Army. As previously noted, the majority of historians use Brownmiller's figures, however others question these. The Bangladeshi government claim 3 million Bengalis were killed and as many as 70,000 unwanted pregnancies caused by rape as compared to Brownmiller's 25,000 (Debnath 2009). Pakistani government figures are substantially lower, at 26,000-50,000 killed, whilst foreign observer estimates are between 200,000-500,000 (Gerlach 2010). Angela Debnath cites Bengali deaths of 1 million, with 200,000-400,000 rapes (Debnath 2009). Press sources from India and Bangladesh in the aftermath of the conflict suggest 400,000 rape victims resulting in 200,000 unwanted pregnancies, of which 150,000-170,000 were aborted 'in highly undesirable yet unavoidable conditions' (Patterson in *Times of India* 1972 and 'Mass Rape in Bangladesh' in *Bangladesh Observer* 1972). The variability of figures hints at the unavailability of accurate data, but also indicates that figures vary according to which groups are speaking.

There is a sharp division in literature of the 1971 war, either 'pro-Bangladesh' or 'pro-Pakistan', where even the use of the term 'genocide' is a point of contention. Christian Gerlach's recent analysis approaches the issue by rationally comparing casualty figures for different groups, emphasising the

militarisation of Bengali society and the somewhat ignored aspect of Bengali violence against non-Bengalis. He does not directly deny a genocide, as other more controversial scholars such as Samila Bose have done, but questions the accuracy of applying the term, as it ‘prioritised’ one policy of violence among many. Bose’s approach, while admittedly making a valid challenge to historiography of the 1971 war, is more reactive than analytical. Her arguments have been described as presenting memories as competitive and reaching arbitrary conclusions, thus undermining what could otherwise have been a compelling work (Das 2013).

Current conceptual debates surrounding ‘genocidal rape’ and the relationship between sexual violence and ethnic violence provide a theoretical background to this study. The 1990s was a particularly formative period, with the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) in 1993 and the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR) in 1994. The recognition of the use of rape, particularly in conflicts with a high rate of civilian involvement, has sparked debate over its definition as a crime targeting women as a group, and/or an ethnically motivated attack on the processes of reproduction, constituting genocide.

Some scholars, such as Susan Brownmiller, locate wartime rape in established ‘peacetime’

structures of male dominance over the female body. These analyses stress the ‘primal’ physical ability of men to rape, in response to which women ‘appoint certain males as their protectors.’ (Brownmiller 1975: 17). There is a danger within such studies to ‘naturalise’ rape in conflict and suggest it is endemic to all periods of war, which a recent study by Robert Hayden has questioned, examining violence of the partition of India among other case studies (Brownmiller 1975). Others, such as cultural anthropologist Ivana Maček, define women in conflict as ‘subjugated objects’ upon which opposing groups of men inscribe ‘messages’ to one another (Maček 2009: 84). Though this analysis aids sociological explorations of the ‘symbolic’ role of sexual violence in conflict, it is not always particularly sensitive (or relevant) to the experience of survivors, and imposes overarching narratives of symbolic significance on their experiences.

### *Methodology*

The sources in this study can be divided, firstly into those used to examine the use of testimonies, and those relating to media discourses on women’s experiences of 1971, in 1970s newspapers from Bangladesh, India and international examples.

### *Testimonies*

The sources used for this section relate to the conflicts in Bangladesh in 1971, and the

breakup of the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s. Amita Malik's *The Year of the Vulture* is an example of a non-neutral author exerting power over an 'informal'<sup>1</sup> collection of oral testimonies of rape and sexual violence. Malik visited Bangladesh (then East Pakistan) from Calcutta in early 1971 and several times subsequently. During her visits she recorded the stories of those she met amongst her own observations. A Bengali by heritage, Malik allows this to guide her analysis, and produces a narrative that affirms the communal ethnic 'martyrdom' of 1971.

As a point of comparison, Catharine MacKinnon's 1994 article 'Turning Rape into Pornography: Postmodern Genocide' is an example of a similar genre. Her article details atrocities committed by the Serbian army during the conflict from a range of testimonial sources. Similarities are evident in the way these texts utilise testimonies as evidence, both contain a mixture of narratives that are systematically rearranged and presented by the author to emphasise broader ethno-nationalist narratives in their respective conflicts.

#### *Newspaper Articles*

The aim of examining newspaper articles as a medium to interpret discourses on women is to

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<sup>1</sup>By 'informal' I here refer to testimonies that are not recorded in an 'interview' type situation; most of Malik's sources appear to be people she meets as she travels around, not who she tries to formally interview.

view the policies as they appeared to the public and were 'consumed' by the nation. Newspapers are a primary tool for engineering mass exposure to ideas: as Benedict Anderson articulated, the process of reading a newspaper is both highly individual and also shared, thus creating an 'imagined linkage' between individuals in an extended group (Anderson 2006: 33-35). This is thus an appropriate medium to examine how state-directed discourses are imposed on individuals and groups. The Dacca paper *The Bangladesh Observer* provides substantial material from which to form a detailed analysis of reporting on the 'Birangona' and the Rehabilitation programme. Additional material comes from *The Times of India* and other international publications, for which the collection by Fazlul Quader Quaderi was an invaluable resource (Quaderi 1972).

Since the only Bangladeshi newspapers available in English for the period are *The Bangladesh Observer* and *Morning News Dacca*, it is difficult to analyse the political 'angle' of *The Bangladesh Observer* in comparison to other contemporary news sources. There is however a stark contrast between these two sources; *Morning News Dacca* contains no mention of women in the war in any of the available volumes. Articles from the paper label humanitarian concerns over Pakistan Army operations as propaganda, (1971: 21<sup>st</sup> July) deny allegations of genocide

in East Pakistan (1971: 6<sup>th</sup> August), and accuse breakaway Pakistani reporter Anthony Mascarenhas's 'exposé' of army crackdowns in the region as exaggeration (1971: 22<sup>nd</sup> June). This paper was also published in Karachi (as *Morning News Karachi*), suggesting West Pakistani ownership and influence of the two papers, which may explain the differing attitudes to *The Bangladesh Observer*. Conversely, *The Bangladesh Observer* devotes an article to mass rape in Bangladesh in 1972, and frequently refers to the establishment and progress of the Rehabilitation programme, whilst *Morning News Dacca* does not report on either.

The political angle of *The Bangladesh Observer* generally accorded with government policies regarding Rehabilitation and did not convey any substantial dissent from state discourses. The paper was founded in 1949 by Hamidul Huq Choudhury, and was originally named *The Pakistan Observer*, changing after independence in 1971 (Nurul Haque 2010). In an obituary to the newspaper, which closed down in 2010, *Daily Star* (Dacca) journalist Nurul Haque notes its support of the Bengali language movement in 1952, and its historical role in 'grow[ing] an enlightened class of Bengali intelligentsia' whilst maintaining a respected independent and 'opinionated' editorial policy (Nurul Haque 2010). From 1972-1984 the paper was under government

ownership, which partly explains the pro-government stance in the years examined.

In order to better analyse the media attitudes toward *Birangona* and Rehabilitation in the 1970s, it would be useful to examine a wider range of newspaper sources. Volumes of *The Bangladesh Today* that were unavailable for the early 1970s may provide more insight, as would cross-examination of the *Birangona* discourse with numerous Bengali language periodicals. This would form a substantial area of possibility for further study. Socio-cultural anthropologist Nayanika Mookherjee has noted that men were also victims of rape and sexual violence during the 1971 conflict in Bangladesh, a narrative which has been almost totally silenced (2012: 1574). This is a promising area of research that will no doubt add substantially to existing studies of sexual violence in the 1971 conflict.

### *Secondary Sources Appraisal*

From the 1990s onwards, due largely to precedents set by the ICTFY and ICTR, scholarly discussion of women's predicament in conflict expanded greatly, particularly relating to rape and sexual violence. Much of this can be found in international law and historical studies, notable sources coming from Francis Pilch, Nicole Hallett and Tazreena Sajjad, chapters in Samuel Totten's edited volume on women and genocide from



2009. These pieces also identify fundamental debates in the internationalism of legal, ethnic and feminist dialogues of women in conflict. Bina D’Costa’s 2011 study of gender, nationalism and war crimes in South Asia also provides an overview of women’s situation in post-independence Bangladesh, as well as drawing on a body of unpublished interviews with women about their ordeals in 1971.

In investigating the origins of Bengali nationalism and within it state discourses about women, truth-telling and nation-building, several contributions to the *Sage Handbook of Nations and Nationalism* were particularly useful, notably those of T.K. Oomen, Sylvia Walby and John Brewer (2006). For the specifically gendered aspects of this, Saayan Chattopadhyay and Mookherjee’s studies of racialised and territorial conceptions of gender and masculinity in the historical region of Bangladesh from colonial to post-independence times exhibit a wealth of ideas. In terms of establishing the currents of state authority over women’s bodies, through depictions of the *Birangona* and Rehabilitation in the media, Kajalie Shehreen Islam’s 2012 article provided inspiration.

For the former Yugoslavia, the works of Rose Lindsey, Siobhan K. Fisher, Cindy S. Snyder et al, and Vesna Kesić were instrumental in constructing an informed analysis of MacKinnon’s text (2002, 1996,

2006, 1994 respectively). These provide a clear account of the debates between Yugoslavian international scholarship and feminist narratives of the conflict.

## Section 1

*The Politics of Testimony: A Comparison of Narrations of Sexual Violence in Bangladesh and the Former Yugoslavia.*

*It had authorised them in a world that values testimony as the voice of the body and analysis and theory as the voice of the brain – where the brain is necessarily more valuable.*

Beverly Allen

Allegations of rape and sexual violence against women have emerged from both the partition of Pakistan in 1971 and the breakup of the former Yugoslavia in the early 1990s. In relating women’s experiences, scholars of the conflicts have conducted extensive research; interviewing survivors, social workers, doctors and representatives from NGOs. In the wake of both conflicts, the use of testimonies has allowed women to voice their experiences. It has however also been criticised for appropriating the experiences of a marginalised victim group for politically minded journalism and scholarship. This section will examine the use of testimony relating to each conflict comparatively and



argue that women's experiences of sexual violence in conflict are appropriated by journalists, scholars, and transnational feminist dialogues. These narratives are imbued with ulterior motives, and hold considerable power over victims and survivors' modes of expression.

When recounting her experiences as an oral historian, and with regard to her work among immigrant communities in Fremantle, Western Australia, in the 1980s and 1990s, Michael Bosworth noted that many women were more reluctant to speak freely when a tape recorder was present, 'from a fear that somehow their words would be used without their knowledge or control' (2013: 25). This encapsulates the inherent power relationship between documenter and subject, when the subject 'entrusts' an accurate relating of their experience. More than with other historical research methods, the collection of oral testimony requires a negation of preformed ideas of the author in favour of the conceptions of the subject; if this does not occur, narratives will be compromised.

In her study of authority issues in oral history, Sheyfali Saujani notes the inevitable process of power sharing between interviewer and interviewee, which makes 'accurate' renditions of experiences extremely difficult to achieve (2012). This section will examine this power relationship in two texts that utilise testimonial sources from each conflict, Amita

Malik's book *The Year of the Vulture* written in 1971 and Catharine MacKinnon's controversial article 'Turning Rape into Pornography: Postmodern Genocide', published in 1994. Both utilise testimonial sources, however use them 'in service' of their arguments, asserting authority over the subjects' narratives.

### *Testimonies in Comparison*

Malik's mode of attaining oral testimony demonstrates an 'informal' approach devoid of details as to her methods. An Indian Council of World Affairs book of testimonies from Bangladesh in 1971 provides an element of comparison with her work (1972). In much of *The Year of the Vulture*, the subjects are often middle or upper class, educated, and/or public figures, who then relate the experiences of others at second-hand or provide their own opinions on the experience of women in the conflict. In an early chapter Malik interviews Ayesha Nabi, Principal of Postgraduate College of Social Work at Dacca University. Though Nabi recounted the abduction of an unspecified number of girls in March 1971, many of whom returned pregnant in early December, it is unclear whether she even met any of the women personally (Malik 1972: 93). Father John Hastings of the United Relief Service is interviewed describing that women he encountered on a visit to Bonagon Hospital had been raped and mutilated (Malik 1972:

66). Interviews with Shahabuddin Ahmad, a high-profile banker; Maya Dasgupta, wife of a high court judge; a selection of village officials and local political figures is also included in the Indian Council of World Affairs book (1972: 12, 19, 38, 51). All relate emotive second-hand accounts of persecuted intellectuals and the abduction and impregnation of women. Though their secondary nature does not necessarily implicate events as untrue, it renders them impossible to substantiate. The dominance of 'official' Bengali voices in place of the women themselves demonstrates the dominance of controversial topics by 'legitimate' voices.

In the former Yugoslavia, Catharine MacKinnon, whilst appearing to expose marginalised narratives of women who experienced violence, was later criticised for her ethics and accuracy. Her analysis combines women's stories of rape with hyper-sexualised commentary that emphasises the indivisibility of Serbian ethno-nationalism and sexual brutality. Stating that 'Xenophobia and misogyny merge here; ethnic hatred is sexualised, bigotry becomes orgasm' (MacKinnon 1994: 75), her text claims that rape by Serbian soldiers was videotaped and used as 'pornographic propaganda' material in the Serbian military and shown on Serbian television, where these tapes were dubbed to reverse nationalities and portray Bosnian-

Herzegovinian and Croatians soldiers as rapists of Serbians (MacKinnon 1994: 75-6). Croatian academic and activist Vesna Kesić questions the validity of this claim, stating that videotapes of this sort were not circulated prior to MacKinnon's article being published, her conclusions therefore relying entirely on hearsay (2006: 269). She also notes that the difference between the Croatian and Serbian dialects is not sufficient enough that the 'dubbing' of voices to reverse nationalities would have been convincing.

The testimonies MacKinnon cites are recollections of particular events tied to the argument that hyper-sexualised violence was distinctly Serbian and used to produce war propaganda. Her first female source, an American colleague 'of Croatian and Bosnian heritage' gleaned from unidentified 'Muslim sources' that videotaped rapes were occurring in Bosnian villages (1994: 75). She then immediately quotes an unidentified female survivor of Bucje concentration camp in Croatia who describes her rape being filmed by Serbian soldiers (MacKinnon 1994: 75). This small fragment is used to highlight the use of derogatory terms by Serbian soldiers towards Croatian Muslim women, to evidence a specifically Serbian brand of sexualised ethnic violence. Her third subject is an elderly Croatian woman who describes her rape by Serbian soldiers at Bucje, where she was forced to claim she was a Serbian woman

attacked by Croats on film so the material could be used as propaganda (1994: 76). MacKinnon uses testimonies to serve her own claims that Serbian propaganda reversed cultural and ethnicity through images 'all in the service of genocide' (1994: 76). She inserts testimonies into 'greater' arch-narratives of genocide as a 'strategy of fascism', leaving little room for the agency of the subjects in determining what (if any) ethnic or national narratives they ascribe their experiences to. MacKinnon only allows these women agency in their relating of events to her, not how they are re-communicated to her readers.

Malik's use of testimony is in some aspects similar to MacKinnon's. Her work contains descriptions of rape, gang rape and sexual mutilation of an extremely graphic nature that emphasises an ethno-nationalist narrative of Bengali suffering, with repeated references to a passive and victimised Bengali race. Despite claiming neutrality in the introduction Malik reveals her ethno-religious 'alliances', declaring she is 'not interested' in atrocities against Hindus, as 'it is much more significant when Muslims attack Muslims' (1972: 18). This bias influences her writing, such as her description of the Bihari Muslim enclave Mirpur, where she dismisses claims of maltreatment by Bengalis and 'pointedly' notes the presence of 'pickles, grain, clean-washed clothes and other signs of reasonably

normal life' (1972: 122-3). Malik's interpretation also fails to account for the massacres of Biharis by Bengalis, numbering in the hundreds in March 1971, and increasing to tens of thousands during the war (Gerlach 2010: 153).

Malik mixes images of sexual violence against women with interviews that stress the targeting of Bengali cultural fundamentals by the Pakistani occupation. Tales of rape and abduction are interspersed with interviews with Bengali cultural figures, such as Jamil Chowdhury, station manager of Dacca Television centres, describing the Pakistan Army enforcing the use of Urdu for broadcasts, and the targeting of professors and students of Bengali language and history at the massacres at Dacca University (Malik 1972: 85, 86, 76). By equating these actions, they are envisioned in an over-arching narrative of Bengali national group affirmation. Malik's stated aim to expose the 'unspoken slaughter and rape' (1972: 5) of Bengali women associates sexual violence with an ethnic struggle that glorifies the Bengali victory, and confirms the role of the 1971 war in forming a solidified nation. The violent events of 1971 become communally owned, so much so that non-victims identify with the ordeals of individuals in their group, creating an imagined community of suffering (Anderson 2006: 204).

Describing sexual violence in the former Yugoslavia strictly in terms of existing ethnic tensions sparked a transnational debate between those who saw it predominantly as a component of ethnic cleansing, and those who understated this in favour of more localised feminist dialogues. Cultural anthropologist Ivana Maček identified women's bodies as 'battlefields for the nation's dignity, purity and continuity' in the former Yugoslavia conflict (2009: 92). In a legally minded analysis, Siobhan K. Fisher sees the 'crime of impregnation by force' as 'distinct from the crime of rape' and labels it a crime of genocide (1996: 93). This view was widely held by the 'international' faction (including MacKinnon) of scholars working on the former Yugoslavia conflict, who cited policies such as the forced confinement of raped women in camps, until it was too late to terminate their pregnancies, as evidence of a genocidal motivation for sexual violence. Similar practices are also noted in Bangladesh, as Tazreena Sajjad defines genocidal rape as an attack not limited to the body, but extending to the body politic in an attempt to control or 'cripple' a socio-economic or biological process (2009: 225).

Others have challenged this narrative; Rose Lindsey criticised the 1992-3 international awareness campaign for overshadowing the existing Yugoslavian feminist community, she also outlines how international attempts

focussed on a statistical approach to sexual violence and the 'proving' of genocide against specific ethnic groups (2002: 65). This reflects a similar tendency to frame sexual violence in a wider international legal dialogue, at the expense of local feminist approaches that focus on the women themselves.

MacKinnon's detailed descriptions of atrocities lifted from testimonials are also criticised by Lindsey, who notes that many are used to form 'lists' later used for 'proving' genocidal policy, or 'sold' to journalists by doctors and NGOs to produce sensationalist reporting (2002: 65). Not only did this create an intellectual split in scholarship of the conflict, but a rift between NGOs who ascribed to either the international 'genocide' narrative, or the Yugoslavian feminist narrative (Lindsey 2002: 67). Kesić accuses MacKinnon of authoring 'war propaganda' that stirred ethnic hatred and revenge and was wilfully ignorant of Yugoslavian ethnicity, culture and feminism (1994: 268). The similarities with Malik's text lie in the veiled motive to relate all experiences of sexual violence to an overarching narrative of genocide, by emphasising the Pakistan Army's targeting of any and all Bengalis 'irrespective of caste or creed' (1972: 5).

### *Ethnic roles and gender roles*

Co-opting testimonies of sexual violence into arch-narratives of ethno-nationalistic suffering

and revenge creates gendered roles specific to 'demonised' ethnic groups. When examining the two conflicts, fundamental similarities in emerging gender and ethnic roles appear. The first is the creation of an 'us and them' narrative, including a brutish, abusive aggressor, synthesising both ethnic hatred and solidarity with one's own ethnic group as the antithesis of the Other. The second is that of the passive, feminised victim, whose recovery is linked to higher institutional authority (the state; NGOs), and whose experience has to be 'recovered' by journalists or academics due to its controversial nature.

MacKinnon creates a universalised figure of the Serb aggressor by highlighting 'deviant' activities within the Serbian military; consumption of homosexual pornography, sexual acts with animals, and collective 'obsession' with pornography evidenced by Serbian news reports showing Serbian tanks 'covered in pornographic images' (1994: 78, 76). Similarly Malik describes the abuse of animals at Dacca Zoo, including sexualised torture and mutilation that echoes her descriptions of violence against women (1972: 148). These descriptions suggest moral depravity and define West Pakistani and Serbian soldiers as brutal rapists in an ongoing production of the Other. Malik also describes the artistic work of a group of children at the Salt Lake No.5 Refugee School, as 'vivid images of raping, looting, and murder by the

Pakistan Army amongst normal scenes of Bengali rural life' (1972: 68-9). Here the idea of corrupting innocence is used in reference to children and on the inherently 'peaceful' and idyllic landscape, casting a passive antagonist to an aimlessly brutal enemy. There is a danger in these roles to homogenise ethnic groups, projecting the cruelty of individuals onto entire populations. Testimonies that relate instances of 'horrific' violence fuel such discourses, not always without any justification, but often with or without the agency of the testifier.

Examining the use of testimony in historical communications of wartime sexual violence illuminates the power relations that emerge in the recording and relation of ordeals. In the works of Malik and MacKinnon authorial appropriation of material into 'invented' narratives is evident. This suggests a comparison with the literary collection *Violentate*, in which two Sarajevan journalists retold survivors' testimonies under the invented name Ehlimana Pašić, and gave impression it was one woman's story (1995). Thus, the stories and voices are homogenised into a single linear narrative whilst the women are separated from their experiences and retain no power over their expression.

The texts examined in comparison demonstrate similarly problematic approaches to using testimonies of sexual violence in conflict. Both Malik and MacKinnon use

fragments of stories that are subsumed by their inclusion as facets of ethnic conflicts, depicted as ‘overarching’ and superior discourses. This deprives the women of agency over the mode of communication of their stories and the arguments they are used to substantiate.

## Section 2

### *Creating the Birangona: Media Portrayals of Victims of Sexual Violence*

*It is the responsibility of society to alleviate the misery of the distressed women.*

Sheikh Mujiber Rahman, 1973.

This section will focus on the portrayal of women within the ‘Rehabilitation’ programme in media sources from the 1970s. The majority of this material is gathered from a detailed study of articles in *The Bangladesh Observer* from 1971-77, with some supplementary examples from *Morning News Dacca*, *The Times of India*, and international press. There are three overarching themes through which discourses on the experiences of women are established. Firstly, the conceptualisation of harmful results of wartime rape is confined to the fields of reproduction and reproductive health, neglecting psychological and emotional suffering of women. Subsequently, women’s experiences are perceived through their relationships with men, and as vehicles

on which men inflict violence and shame on one another. Finally, women’s experiences in 1971 are co-opted into an ‘accepted’ dialogue where the women become (passive) victims and the state an (active) paternal figure, sanctioning ‘rehabilitation’ via certain accepted scripts.

The article ‘Mass Rape in Bangladesh’ from the *Times of India* (1972) and duplicated in *The Bangladesh Observer* some 10 days later, is a direct example of the South Asian press analysis of rape during 1971. The article discusses the plight of women, quoting statistics of 400,000-430,000 raped, 200,000 pregnancies and 150,000-170,000 abortions, based on Dr Davis, a visiting specialist’s, personal estimates (1972: 1<sup>st</sup> October and 11<sup>th</sup> October respectively). The article opens with ‘An entire generation of women in Bangladesh ... now face a lifetime of infertility...’ thus establishing the centrality of reproductive capacity to the identity of these women. Dr Davis also notes that they would ‘have enormous difficulty finding someone to marry them,’ thus framing their experience in terms of their reproductive capacity, and through male perceptions of their ‘shame’ (*Times of India* and *Bangladesh Observer* 1972).

Reports of sexual violence reached the international press through allegations of genocide against the Bengali people by the Pakistan army. Anthony Mascarenhas’s much-



quoted *Sunday Times* article<sup>2</sup> of June 1971 details violence against Bihari women by Bengalis, in which women were raped and mutilated (Quaderi 1972: 112). He also quotes senior military and civil officers in Dacca and Comilla saying ‘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’ as evidence of imperialistic and genocidal intent towards Bengalis (Quaderi 1972: 118). A *Newsweek* article from June 1971 quotes the same Father John Hastings, detailing the brutality of the Pakistan Army soldiers, including killing of babies and rape, mutilation and killing of women (Quaderi 1972: 158). Hastings worked as part of the Relief Service at Bonagon Hospital during the war, and in all three of the interviews cited in this study, he states that he often treated women who had been raped.<sup>3</sup>

Though reports of mass killings and sexual violence on the part of West Pakistani forces were reaching the international media, a different story was unfolding in Dacca newspapers. In response to Anthony Mascarenhas’s article, *Morning News Dacca* claimed his assertions were ‘wholly

inaccurate’ since the occupation covered only a ‘limited area surrounding Comilla and Dacca’ (‘Pak newsman’s account of East Wing events in *Sunday Times* abutted’ 1971: 22<sup>nd</sup> June). A later article in the same paper, ‘Humanitarian aid or propaganda?’ accuses foreign news media of creating ‘fear and insecurity’ among the ‘simple and mostly illiterate’ population, fuelling the refugee crisis and international ‘media frenzy’ (1972: 21<sup>st</sup> July). The article quotes another at the *Hindustan Times* ‘admitting’ that ‘distance between myth and reality in some of the news reports presented an inflated picture’. Articles such as this highlight the role of the Indian press in espousing the Bangladesh cause, which David Loshak claims included exaggerated reporting of *Mukti Bahini*<sup>4</sup> victories over the Pakistan Army on an almost daily basis (1971: 91). This does not suggest that all Indian press articles relating to Pakistani army actions in Bangladesh exaggerate the figures, but the fact that some exemplify this should be held in mind when dealing with these sources.

### *State Authority and the Rehabilitation Programme*

The immediate response of the new Awami League government under Sheikh Mujibur Rahman (‘Mujib’) was to not silence stories of

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<sup>2</sup> Anthony Mascarenhas was a former Assistant Editor at *Morning News Karachi*. In his article for *The Sunday Times*, he claims he would not have been able to publish his findings in his own paper.

<sup>3</sup> See previous references to Hastings, cited in *Times of India* and *The Bangladesh Observer*.

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<sup>4</sup> The collective name for Bangladesh resistance forces.



wartime rape, which became standard practice in the years following the ousting of his government in 1975 (D'Costa 2011). Under Mujib, counter to the expected shaming and ostracising of rape victims, women were dubbed '*Birangona*' (war heroines) with the aim of granting them an eminent position in society, and providing them with access to employment and learning in specialised 'rehabilitation centres'. The government also attempted to 'marry off' the women, but few men came forward, and those that did expected large dowries from the state in excess of the BDT 5,000 (US\$100) offered (D'Costa 2011). As noted by Shehreen Islam in her examination of the *Birangona* in terms of Michel Foucault's concept of biopower, the title alone made women 'docile subjects' who had to 'earn' its use by their participation in Rehabilitation programmes (2012: 21338). Mujib assumed a paternal role over the women by referring to them as his daughters and asking Bangladeshi society to accept them. He also claimed authority over women more directly, by stating 'None of the bastard babies, who carry the blood of Pakistanis, will be allowed to remain in Bangladesh' (D'Costa 2011: 133). Though the prevailing attitude toward raped women aimed to 'help', it was limited in its scope and entailed an exertion of state power over women's bodies. It is also impossible not to notice the absence of women from newspaper articles; the 'subject' of

Rehabilitation is entirely missing and is never quoted, thus rendering them practically 'unspeakable' and 'unthinkable' (Y. Saika quoted in Islam 2012: 2143).

There are several examples of reporting on the Rehabilitation programme in South Asian press that illustrate the domination of women's voices by the state. A *Bangladesh Observer* article from 1972 describes the teaching of skills such as sewing, handicrafts and secretarial training in the centres, in order that the women 'might be useful hands in the national economy with government encouragement' ('Programme for rehabilitation of destitute women': 3<sup>rd</sup> October). Thus, Rehabilitation comes to mean participation in the nation-building project. Another article in the same paper entitled 'Women must help rebuild country' advocates women's essential role in upholding morality in Bangladesh and resisting opposition of Mujib's government, placing women in a position of service to the nation (1972: 8<sup>th</sup> October).

The 'integration' of women is further detailed in the *Bangladesh Observer*, addressing the extension of education programmes for 'war-affected' women to 15,000 others, mainly from rural areas, as part of a five year plan ('Funds shortage ails women's rehabilitation programme' 1972: 9<sup>th</sup> October). The article quotes a Mr. Justice

Subhan stating that all women need to be trained, with ‘special emphasis’ on the war-affected, in order to achieve effective development. This argument is linked to broader encouragement of women to participate, through the rhetoric of ‘liberation’:

Mr Justice Subhan holds that the impact of the Liberation War forced the women, particularly the village-women, to free themselves at least temporarily from the shackles of conservatism. This opportunity must be seized and exploited promptly before they crawl back to their old practices.

Here women’s emancipation is synonymous with the creation of a strong nation through development. This allows for their co-option in both public and private spheres (this extract demonstrates the aim to ‘draw women out’ of their traditional private sphere) in service of the state. This discourse is built upon in another *Bangladesh Observer* 1972 article that calls for support for the Rehabilitation programmes. Here, Begum Zahur Ahmed Chowdhury (wife of the Minister for Health and Social Welfare) gives a speech ‘recalling the barbarity of the Pakistan Army’ and honouring the women of Bangladesh who ‘remained defiant by giving shelter to the freedom fighters, collecting information ... and took an active part in the freedom struggle’ (‘Destitute home opened for Pabna’ 1972: 15<sup>th</sup> October). She solicits help

for ‘destitute’ women (those undergoing Rehabilitation) ‘in thanks for their contribution’, thus creating a sense of comradeship between nation and war heroine. Emphasising societal responsibility for these women reinforces their passive role under an active state in an unbalanced yet reciprocal relationship, as Begum Chowdhury states, ‘without Rehabilitation, independence would be a mockery’. This is further exemplified in ‘Help rehabilitate distressed women’ in which an exhibition of women’s handicrafts is used to publicly underline the importance of expanding the Rehabilitation program to reach more ‘who suffered for the liberation of the country’ (1973: 13<sup>th</sup> January).

The emphasis on involving women in economic production lends itself to a Foucauldian analysis. The control of women’s bodies through their insertion into the modes of production allows the silencing and redefining of their experience as a sacrifice to the ‘controller’ or ‘regulator’ of production (in this case the state), who is now ‘repaying’ the women by engaging them in the new nation (Rabinow 1986: 263). Foucault highlights the importance of sex and sexuality, due to their essentiality to the spheres of the body and of production, such that sex is often a ‘crucial target of a power organised around the management of life’ (Rabinow 1986: 267-8). This is certainly evident in the *Birangona* discourse, as the state directly responded to

sexual violation with the creation of collective production scripts to assert direct power over the body through inclusion in a (national) collective.

#### *Abortion Policy and 'War Babies'*

The politicisation of sex and reproduction is especially evident in the program of (legalised) abortion and adoption of 'war babies'. Both tenets of the Rehabilitation programme, they demonstrate a direct imposition of nationalist discourses on the female body.

In another *Times of India* article published earlier in 1972, journalist Harii Malik describes the legalisation of abortion as an 'official blessing' that saved many women from unsafe 'private' abortions (Harii Malik 1972: 16<sup>th</sup> April). Undoubtedly this was positive impact on women's health, but also represents the exercising of state power over reproduction and placed the new government in a position of authority over women's bodies. This theme was essential to subsuming women's experiences of abuse into the narrative of Bengali state-legitimation. It also represents a significant invasion of women's private lives in a culture that predominantly confines women's affairs to the private sphere.

In her recent analysis of nation-building, gender and nationalism in post-independence Bangladesh, D'Costa suggests another

narrative to the legalisation and 'mass' abortions of raped women. The legalisation of abortion and establishment of countrywide clinics by Planned Parenthood and the Central Organisation for Women's Rehabilitation (Harii Mailk 1972) was no doubt extremely beneficial for rape survivors who were unable or did not wish to continue their pregnancies. As a leading figure from the women's organisation told the *Times of India* (1972), many girls were very young (those mentioned in Malik's article are between 13 and 16 years old), and the lack of health provision in rural areas led to badly conducted home abortions or suicide resulting from familial rejection.

The involvement of Planned Parenthood (fully Planned Parenthood Federation of America), founded in 1916, was at variance with US foreign policy towards the emerging nation. The then president Richard Nixon maintained support for Pakistan throughout the 1971 conflict, both because of fears of the hegemony of a 'socialist' India in South Asia, and to avoid the creation of an economically weak state prone to communist influence (Warner 2005). However, previous foreign policy under president John F. Kennedy demonstrated a more sympathetic attitude to India; one that Nixon rejected, though evidence suggests that Nixon's attitude toward Bangladesh was not uniformly held in the administration (Warner 2005). This is exemplified by the well-known telegrams

Archer K. Blood from the US Consulate at Dacca, which articulated the brutality of West Pakistani repression, and of which Nixon and Henry Kissinger were dismissive (Warner 2005). Aspects of public opinion, as demonstrated by George Harrison and Ravi Shankar's 'Concert for Bangla Desh', held on August 1<sup>st</sup>, 1971, also countered Nixon's line. Whilst a full investigation of the contradictions between official policy and public opinion in the US are beyond the scope of this study, it is relevant to note that Planned Parenthood's earlier involvement was outwith official US policy, which did not extend diplomatic recognition to Bangladesh until April 1972. As the *Times of India* article mentioned above is dated April 16<sup>th</sup>, 1972, we can surmise that Planned Parenthood's involvement predated official US recognition.

Whilst the abortion programme alleviated some of these immediate effects, it also presented an opportunity for the imposition of state authority and the application of nationalist and racialised narratives to the unborn. The attitude of the *Bangladesh Observer* toward 'war babies' accords with Mujib's declaration, many 'war babies' were sent away from the national territory (Mujib quoted in D'Costa 2011). This practice was a public rejection of Pakistani 'blood' in reprisal for racialised rhetoric surrounding forced impregnation of Bengali women, such as one

quoted soldier: 'We are going, but we are leaving our seed behind' (Malik 1972: 10).

An article from the *Bangladesh Observer* detailed the adoption of fifteen 'war babies' by Canadian families, beside pictures of the babies with their new parents ('War babies to leave for new homes' 1973: 30<sup>th</sup> July). The 'national shame' has here been turned into a mode of national 'cleansing', whereby the undesirable blood is, quite literally, exported. Even simply by naming the offspring of rape 'war babies' they are defined in opposition to the desired Bengali citizen, establishing acceptable 'limits' within which victims, survivors and investigators of 1971 were able to act.

D'Costa's extensive collection of interviews, many unpublished, upon which she bases her analyses include evidence of similar attitudes. Her interviewees describe an 'alliance' between social workers and state, through which women's agency over their babies was circumnavigated. One interview with a social worker detailed how sexual violence was often not discussed with survivors, nor were options regarding abortion and adoption (D'Costa 2011). 'War babies' were made undesirable to the family through the practices of the state, which did not recognise the children as its own citizens. Another interview with a social worker stated that on some occasions women who refused to give up their babies had been sedated and had

them taken away (D'Costa 2011). Though this does not evidence 'general' policy, it aids in reconstructing codes of behaviour surrounding children of wartime rape in post-conflict Bangladesh.

Examples thus far have cast raped women in the role of passive victims who must follow state-directed principles (institutionalised skill learning, rejection of children by abortion, adoption). Deviancy from the established role often results in expulsion of that individual from the framework of state-sponsored Rehabilitation. Among Amita Malik's collected testimonies is one from the Director of a Rehabilitation Centre in Dacca, who relates the centre's most 'strange' case:

The girl had been taken repeatedly for use at the Cantonment. She was able to have an abortion after the surrender but something terrible had happened. The soldiers had made her a sexual pervert. (Malik 1972: 139)

The behaviour described indicates that she showed little shame and appeared 'unrepentant'. This sexual aberration is considered threatening to the established script, as it does not accord with the state-victim exchange. There is also suggested co-option between the woman and the soldiers, who have 'inflicted' this, and thus she is identified with the enemy.

Through examining a variety of articles relating to 'war-affected' women, the attitudes towards these women have been outlined. The

tendency to view them purely by their reproductive capacity is evident, through discourse on racialised 'war babies'. The inclusion of women in economic-nationalist programmes of Rehabilitation suggests that women's experiences have been co-opted into notions of 'development' and 'liberation', whilst an otherwise socially unacceptable predicament has become a primary tenet of nation building.

### Section 3

#### *Producing the Nation: Gendered Discourses in Remembering 1971*

*The nation's bibliography snatches,  
against the going mortality rate,  
exemplary suicides, poignant  
martyrdoms, assassinations,  
executions, wars and holocausts.  
But, to serve the narrative purpose,  
these violent deaths must be  
remembered/forgotten as "our  
own".*

Benedict Anderson

*Nationalist struggles often call upon  
women to assume the role of keepers  
of tradition, thus absorbing them  
into the most passive, secondary,  
and privatised spaces in the official  
narratives of nationalism.*

Bina D'Costa

In order to place the media depictions of women's experiences during the 1971 conflict in context, it is prudent to first examine how press articles present a retrospective conception of Bengali nationalism, and conceptualise difference between West and East Pakistan prior to 1971. This is exemplified in a *Bangladesh Observer* Independence Day supplement edition from 1973 that addresses human rights violations in 1971. The article both eulogises suffering and makes assertions of a Pakistani genocide against Bengalis. The extensive list of human rights abuses are here subsumed into the overall 'plan' for genocide:

But the violation of human rights so persistently followed during the 9 months of occupation, is but an insignificant part of the whole story. *More important* is the fact that the "master race" from the Punjabi Plains have executed a well-planned scheme of genocide in Bangladesh, the magnitude of which has transcended all records of known history. [emphasis added] (1973: 26<sup>th</sup> March)

The author Dr M. Maniruzzaman accentuates the gravity of racialised and genocidal aspects of the conflict to support the claim of genocidal intent. Later he cites Ayub Khan's autobiography, claiming Khan envisioned the Bengali race as 'directly descended from the aboriginal Indian tribes and therefore by implication stunted intellectually and uncivilised.' For Khan,

Bengalis 'have always been under the domination of others and consequently are psychologically incapable of being their own masters.' The 'pure', civilised, Islamic Pakistani race is imagined in opposition to the primitive, tribal and weak Bengali. Conversely Bengali narratives construct the 'peace loving', gentle Bengali race in opposition to brutish, imperialist Pakistanis. Maniruzzaman uses the term 'Punjabi' to denote 'West Pakistani'; Chattopadhyay notes that Punjab soldiers were more demonised than those from other Pakistani ethnic groups in the Pakistan Army, such as Baluchis (Chattopadhyay 2011).

Bengali nationalism often cites the legacies of Partition. The 1947 formation of Pakistan saw an emergent national identity based on the common religion of Islam, and excluding other factors such as language or ethnicity. Muhammad Ali Jinnah's speech delivered in Lahore on March 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1940, identifies Islam and Hinduism not as religions 'in the strict sense of the word', but as 'different and distinct social orders' incompatible within the same national identity, to justify the carving of the subcontinent along religious lines. The separation of Bengalis from the Pakistani national community involved a process of collective remembrance and amnesia, which led to a move away from religion and towards other elements, primarily language, as definers



of national identity (Delanty and Kumar 2006).

Gerlach's socio-economic analysis cites the growth of Bengali middle class opposition to West Pakistani capitalist hegemony and the complementary exercising of cultural authority, such as continued official use of Urdu, as reasons for the redefining of East Pakistani territoriality in ethnic terms (2010). A poignant relationship between language and statehood was established in opposition to its West Pakistani affluent 'rivals', and was developed by an expanding Bengali bourgeoisie. Language was central to the construction of Bengali nationalism, culminating in the *bhasha andolon* (language movement or 'Mother Tongue Revolution') of 1952, that acted as a 'spark' to 1960s autonomy movements and led to the reclassification of Bengali as a national language in the 1956 Constitution (D'Costa 2011).

The young, middle class student community became a locus of Bengali nationalism, and separatism in the 1960s autonomy movements. In this formative stage of the Bengali independence campaign, the academic and student communities espoused the importance of language in iconic events such as the *bhasha andolon* (Alam et al 2011). Research conducted by Gazi Mahabubul Alam et al suggest that students' campaign groups played a similar role to that of political parties

and the young Awami League, by travelling in rural areas to promote independence (2011).

Thus students established and affirmed the intellectual 'leadership' role in national identity formation.

The gendered aspect of these narratives can be examined in (changing) media depictions of women participating in the history of the independence war. As noted in the previous section, in the years succeeding the war women are perceived as passive survivors whose suffering is incremental to the realisation of Bengali nationalism.

A 1973 *Bangladesh Observer* report on the Ministry of Relief and Rehabilitation exemplifies the connection between Rehabilitation and Bengali nationalism, and the 'suffering' of women for the nationalist project. The sanctifying of the 1971 ordeal is affected by ascribing a sacred significance to the ordeal that is 'difficult to describe in language', and comparing its magnitude with that of '1000 My Lais' to assert a sense of communal suffering ('Ministry of relief and rehabilitation' 1973: 28<sup>th</sup> January). The article lists the costs of the destruction of homes and businesses (though does not give a source), and puts the number of women 'made destitute' at 234,000, though is unspecific about the meaning of 'destitute'. The reconstruction movement is described as a 'course to freedom', linking ideas of



development and national character building, communal struggle and a 'new-born nation'.

A 1977 supplement from *The Bangladesh Observer* investigating the role of women and national development devoted an article to women in the language movement of 1952. The article focuses on the presence of female students in boycotts during the language movement, and thus women are included in the 'canon' of Bengali nationalism leading toward the 1971 'War of Liberation' ('Language movement and or women 1977: 21<sup>st</sup> February'). It describes how individual women led rallies, held meetings, protested against the 'black laws and other anti-people policies' of Ayub Khan's government, and were 'mercilessly beaten' by the police for their activism. This episode is described as a 'glorious chapter' in the 'struggle-torn history of the Bangladeshis'; the sacrifice made by those 'of the soil for the sake of the mother tongue'. Placing this event in a continuum is used to give coherency to the Bangladeshi independence struggle in which women are depicted as active.

This demonstrates a move away from the depiction of raped women as passive sufferers and tends toward glorifying their role in the nationalist struggle alongside male counterparts. The women described in the article are active; they are protesting, they are voting, the focus is no longer on the powerless victim. The 'masculinisation' of women in

national remembrance represents a departure from previous attitudes to the passivity of the *Birangona* in the Mujib years. Though this new discourse bestows a more active role upon women, the portrayal focuses on examples of participation, to the exclusion of narratives of violence that infer victimisation (here synonymous with feminisation). The casting of 'active' women is still tied to a distinctly gendered conception where in order for women not to be portrayed as 'victims', they must by default attain male characteristics.

When contrasted to a 1973 article from the same paper, 'Help rehabilitate distressed women', the differences in national imaginings of women's roles is evident. The woman undergoing 'rehabilitation' are associated with handicrafts, family life, 'humanitarian' aid and adoption of voluntary roles (1973: 13<sup>th</sup> January). Women are also described as victims of 'barbarous Pakistani occupation forces'. In contrast, the post-independence 'participant' of the 1977 article 'Our Women and National Development' is defined by economic autonomy, expansion outwith accepted careers for women, 'awakening' from traditionalist 'bondage', and national integration (1977: 26<sup>th</sup> March). The 1977 article on women in the 1952 language movement stresses their role as organisers, protestors, and patriots acting in tandem with men, indicating a shift from earlier discourses

of Rehabilitation practiced by Mujib's government. A narrative of community, produced through struggle and suffering, is present in all these articles, however the sanctioned gender roles within them changed between the early to late 1970s.

This example of 'active-male', 'passive-female' roles in sanctioned sources of national memory is linked to discourses of the pacification and feminisation of the Bengali race. Chattopadhyay cites the role of British colonialism in constructing an effeminate identity for the Bengali male, especially when compared with other North Indian races that often held a larger presence in the colonial army (2011). Within this discourse the Bengali male was associated with the perceived 'frailty' of women and the 'powerlessness of the submissive slave' (Chattopadhyay 2011 and Mohaiemen 2008: 38). This correlated with West Pakistani discourses that identified Bengalis with primitive tribalism, and Bengali self-identification narratives that depicted a gentle, peace-loving people opposing a violent, masculine enemy. Mookherjee identifies Pakistani discourses that conceptualised Bengali Muslim culture as 'impure', 'Hinduized' and 'Indianized' against the untainted Islamic, Urdu-speaking Western province (Mookherjee 2012). These recurring themes highlight the fundamental ways in which gendered and racialised roles are

overlaid by West Pakistani and Bengali Muslim discourses, in order to compose oppositional identities.

An alternative analysis closely relates accusations of genocidal policy toward the Bengali population to the use of mass rape in 1971. Within this, women are targeted for their symbolic role as child-bearers. Sylvia Walby notes the centrality of women's purity and chastity to nationalist symbolism, viewing women's reproductive capacities as 'carriers of culture' (2006). This is exacerbated by the co-option of women's private sphere into nationalist narratives where women's bodies are cultural vessels. Mookherjee notes that post-1971 media discourses often stressed the beauty of the raped Bengali woman, and the loss of one 'who otherwise would have been available for a "legitimate" heterosexual motherhood' (2012: 1584). Assault of woman therefore becomes by default an assault on society.

Bengali nationalism is highly significant to the discourse of Rehabilitation and the *Birangona*, as it provides the ideological scripts within which power over narratives of sexual violence in 1971 are directed. Women are co-opted into this canonical view of Bengali nationalism and the independence struggle, such that their ordeals become part of a communal assault on Bengali integrity, against which notions of ethnic communality and identity are defined. Self-definitions of the

Bengali racial character, as well as West Pakistani ideas, allow women to become passive cultural vessels, and their violation symbolic of an ethnic martyrdom. As women's experiences are unable to exist outside these assigned roles, the state exercises power over women's voices and bodies to force inclusion in narratives of Bengali nationalism and state forming.

### Conclusion

This study has used three different approaches to examine how discourses of power operate over the voices of women who experienced sexual violence in conflict. Firstly, the use of testimonies in texts where the author imposes their own voice renders women's experiences as fragmented, incomplete narratives, denies their agency in how these are expressed, and what secondary theses they are used to prove. This is characterised by a lack of context to quotations, equation of experiences into 'similar' categories, (such as MacKinnon's 'listing' of rape survivors' narratives from Bucje camp) and selective inclusion of experiences that demonstrate or prove the author's argument.

Secondly, similar assertions of power are present in the depiction of raped women as *Birangona* in Bangladeshi press, where the state asserted a paternalist authority over victims of sexual violence in 1971. This discourse envisioned women through their

relations with men, as reproducers, wives, and 'carriers of culture', whilst excluding the voices of the women (Delanty and Kumar 2006).

Thirdly, the role of Bengali nationalism was examined in a range of press articles; how raped women were included in defining the Bengali national character, and how this co-opted their experience into discourses of nation building. Within the creation of racial-national character roles, women are passive victims, upon which nationalist discourses are imposed. Roles are created for both genders and Bengali and 'Pakistani' ethnicities, with each establishing their own character in opposition to the other.

In assessing sexual violence in a war that represented a realisation of ethnic nationalism, the intertwining of notions of gender with those of ethnicity is largely unavoidable. The utilisation of women's narratives for allegations of attack on an ethnic group does however result in the eclipsing of stories into 'ulterior' discourses outside the control of the speakers. Women's experiences of 1971 should not be subsumed, or retain the right to object to being subsumed, within arch-narratives that imagine the occurrence of sexual violence as a mere component of a more 'important' narrative of genocide.

Amita Malik and Catharine MacKinnon both exemplify this co-option at the base level of the individual interpretation, using

anonymous testimonial fragments to construct emotive narratives of ethnic hatred. By creating the *Birangona* and designing her Rehabilitation, Mujib intended to extend the 'hand' of inclusion, but the focus on societal integration left social perceptions of rape and treatment of rape victims unchallenged (D'Costa in Miles & McFadden (eds) 2004). Just as 'war babies' became passive figures, upon which the definition of Pakistani blood as impure and profoundly different to Bengali was inscribed, so the *Birangona* became a figure upon which the state extolled its national reconstruction narratives.

The issue of violence against women and war crimes in general during 1971 remains politically salient today. In recent years, the 2009 Amendment Act to the 1973 Bangladesh International Criminal (Tribunals) Act gave consent to the trial of 1971 war criminals (Sen 2012). Despite accusations of unfairness and political show trialling, in 2013 thousands gathered in central Dacca to take part in the Shahbag Protests, demanding capital punishment of 1971 war criminals, in particular Abdul Quader Mollah of Islamist political party Jamaat-e-Islami, who was sentenced to life imprisonment (Sen 2012 and 'Huge Bangladesh rally seeks death penalty for war criminals' 2013). This demonstrates the continuing political gravity of 1971 and the relevance of continued research into women's experiences in the conflict. D'Costa

cites the recent Ain-O-Shalish-Kendra oral history project as an example of ongoing contemporary interest in compiling experiences and stimulating truth telling. The increased inclusion of women's narratives in interpreting 1971 is a valuable source for further analysis, and will conceivably inspire further writing on the subject.

Whilst this study has predominantly addressed how women's voices have been restricted, co-opted and subsumed by other narratives, it also aims to outline the lenses through which these processes occur, such that these might be guarded against. Whether it is through the practice of oral history, international law, or journalism, the degradation of survivors to objectual battlegrounds for the 'assertion of power and control' must be avoided in order to grant them the space to speak, and the agency to determine the uses and effects of their voices (Sajjad in Totten (ed) 2009). 🍌

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