Time of the Writing, the Hour of Reading

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BOOK REVIEWS

The Spectral Wound: Sexual Violence, Public Memories and the Bangladesh War of 1971
by Nayanika Mookherjee, *Durham: Duke, 2015; pp 325, $26.95, paperback.*

Nayanika Mookherjee acknowledges that *The Spectral Wound* has taken "a long time" (xxi) to write. She tells us about the early morning "thought struggle," as well as the ethical challenges involved in crafting this work.

At the time she started her research, there were no major English language works on the *birangonas*, the officially sanctioned term for victims of rape during the 1971 Bangladesh independence war. In the intervening years, several researchers have begun looking into similar terrain, possibly intellectually and emotionally inspired by elements Mookherjee also cites in her journey. These elements include the *Ain o Salish Kendra* oral history project, the Nilima Ibrahim book and related works *Ami Birangona Bolchi* (I am Birangona Speaking), the codification of the birangona in plays and films, and the evolution of a visual literacy (we may say scepticism) that has led anthropologists to go back and look at some of the iconic "horror" images produced in the aftermath of the 1971 war. This visual anthropology has included works that problematise the male gaze on the birangona, as in Sayema Khatun's *Muktijuddher His-Story: Ijjat o Lojja* (His-Story of Liberation War: Honor and Shame) in the Rahnuma Ahmed (ed), *Public Anthropology* series. Ahmed herself has parsed Naibuddin Ahmed's iconic image of a rape victim ("Distances," *New Age*, 26 March 2008), and that reading can be productively placed alongside Mookherjee's rereading of Naib Uddin's photographs.

Books on Women in 1971

In the last five years, three English language books have appeared that also touch or focus on the role of women in the 1971 war, including the category of the birangona. I centre these works here because they have come from academics primarily based in the West, and published from American and European presses. This is the same context in which Mookherjee's book will probably most widely circulate, therefore her audience will read these other works alongside hers; they may also overlook works like that of Khatun, unless it is translated.

Among the English language publications, the most analogous is Yasmin Saikia's *Women, War, and the Making of Bangladesh* (Duke 2011), which received a very different, noticeably cooler, reception in Bangladesh. The second book is Bina D'Costa's *Nationbuilding, Gender and War Crimes in South Asia* (Routledge 2011), which included the Bangladesh war crimes case within a multi-country study. Finally, there is the widely debated revisionist history of 1971, *Dead Reckoning* by Sarmila Bose. In claiming that the Pakistani army behaved as per the rules of war, Bose dismisses the charges of targeted killings of Hindus, as well as war rapes.

Mookherjee was one of the first critical respondents to the book, in *The Guardian* and then in EPW (when I wrote my own response to Bose, "Flying Blind: Waiting for a Real Reckoning on 1971," EPW, 3 September 2011, I focused on other aspects of the book as the issue of wartime rape had been addressed by Mookherjee). Through these responses, as well as a series of linked academic essays, Mookherjee has actively engaged with the ecology of research around war crimes in 1971.

One benefit of this book's long gestation is the ability to go back and revisit the ethnography in Enayetpur, as well as a large visual record (photography, cinema, publications, and theatre). Mookherjee has repeatedly used the term *achrano* (combing), gleaned from one of her interviewees. She has deployed this metaphor of combing over as something that both reveals and obscures. Her ethnography has also been enhanced by a combing process, showing us nuances, slights, and hidden objects that reveal over the long duration. The research obstacles that she describes frankly were also possible because of the longer engagement with this project. The book contains ethnography that looks not only at what is spoken, but the ecosystem within which such speech is made possible. She tells us early on that a researcher warns her she will have to hear *altufaltu* (nonsense) (p 49), but in fact what this patient researcher finds are "talkable" ithash (history) (p 57). She notes astutely the role of the gatekeepers of the narrative (p 61) in guiding stories down certain channels, so much so that Mookherjee stopped asking directed questions about *ghotona* (the event) and instead allowed the women to find their way through their stories.

Management of Birangona Story

The second layer of ethnography is of the story circulation environment. One of the book's important interventions is an unflinching cataloguing of the management of the birangona story, and some of this will be uncomfortable reading for those who have witnessed this performative element, but chose to be silent for fear of treading on sacred grounds. We read that some of the initial birangonas were given *ashah* (assurance) (p 60) by civil society movements about material gains (for example, houses, land, jobs) for consenting to be photographed and having their stories told. One can of course argue that compensation was an ethical necessity given the time away from livelihood, as well as to offset the social and economic stigma that could result in villages after going