<CN>Chapter 17</CN>

<*CT*>*Birangona*</*CT*>

<CST>Toward Ethical Testimonies of Sexual Violence during Conflict</CST>

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<HDA>Project Background</HDA>

<FL>Sexual violence during conflict is understood to be a cost of war, consigned to oblivion and silence. In response to the assumed silence about wartime rape, feminists and activists have found it imperative to testify, to witness, to speak out, to "recover," to give voice to raped women's narratives. Such activism has publicized the rapes of comfort women in Japan during World War II, the rapes in Bosnia and Rwanda in the 1990s, and sexual violence in Darfur and Congo.[1] However, in Bangladesh, wartime rape was part of a public conversation immediately after the Bangladesh war of 1971, then reemerged as part of the public discussion in the 1990s, but remained as a public memory throughout its near fifty years by means of literary and visual representations.</FL>

In the years after the East and West Pakistan partition from colonized British India in 1947, various West Pakistani administrative, military, linguistic, civil, and economic controls over East Pakistan resulted in a nine-month war in 1971 and ultimately the formation of a wholly independent Bangladesh. Bangladesh was faced with a staggering three million dead, and with two hundred thousand women (official numbers) raped by the Pakistani army and *Razakars* (local Bengali collaborators). The Bangladeshi government took the globally unprecedented step of referring to the raped women as *birangonas* (war heroines) to prevent them from being socially ostracized and attempted to rehabilitate them by enabling them to have abortions,

facilitating the adoption of war babies to Western countries, and marrying the women off or providing them jobs.

Unfortunately, for various political reasons, the Bangladeshi press and government fell silent on the *birangonas* between 1975 and the 1990s. The issue of wartime rape, however, still remained on the public stage as a topic of literary and visual media (newspapers, films, plays, novels, poems, and photography), ensuring that the raped woman endures as an iconic figure. Since the 1990s, various direct testimonies of *birangonas* have been recorded, and many women have spoken out publicly about their wartime and postwar experiences (see Akhtar et al. 2001).

During my research in Bangladesh in 1997, I indeed found that sexual violence, instead of being hidden as elsewhere, was continually invoked, and not only in state speeches and policies eulogizing the *birangonas*. The figure of the *birangona* could be found in newspapers, museums, and in various literary (novels, poems, plays) and visual (photographs, films, street plays, advertisements, paintings) representations throughout the near fifty years of Bangladesh. I gathered in-depth ethnographic information and insights from eleven survivors (as well as their families and communities) who were publicly known and were speaking about their experiences on their own volition for various reasons. I also worked with activists and state officials and researched archival, press, literary, and visual sources. This public memory of wartime sexual violence is highlighted in my book *The Spectral Wound: Sexual Violence, Public Memories and the Bangladesh War of 1971* (Mookherjee 2015).

My research and activities address three main problems surrounding the *birangonas*. The first is that this public memory of the *birangona* contradicts the prevalent assumption that there is silence regarding wartime rape. My work highlights various socioeconomic dynamics within which the ideologies of gender, honor, and shame are practiced among the *birangonas*, showing

that the public memory of wartime rape manifests in Bangladesh in three ways: first, the state category of raped women as *birangonas*; second, an extensive archive of visual and literary representations dating back to 1971; and third, human rights testimonies of poor and middle-class *birangonas* since the 1990s.

The second problem emerging during my research is that nongovernmental organization (NGO) activists, human rights lawyers, intellectuals, writers, journalists, academics, and feminists who knew about my research among poorer *birangonas* would invariably ask: "Are they married?" "Do they have a family, children, *kutumb* [in-laws]?" "Did their husband know of the incident of rape?" These questions revealed a class bias among the activists who assumed all poor *birangonas* were not absorbed by their families. My answers would amaze them: the poor, rural, landless, and illiterate women continue to be married to their landless husbands with whom they were married even before 1971, *in spite* of the rape. My research shows that identifying raped women only through their suffering not only creates a homogeneous understanding of victims but also suggests that wartime rape is experienced in the same way by all victims.

The third problem involves postconflict urgency to record survivors' testimonies to achieve justice. The Bangladeshi liberal left activist community in the 1990s started collecting these testimonies as evidence of the injustices and what many would consider to be genocide committed through the 1971 rapes and killings.[2] With this sole focus on documenting the "horrific" experiences of wartime rape, inadequate attention is paid to both the conditions (how they are interviewed) under which such testimonies are recorded and the way the war heroines themselves want to articulate their experiences, not only of 1971 but of the trajectories of their subsequent, postconflict lives.

As a result, ethical (relating to principles of informed consent, sensitivity, doing no harm, protection of survivors, anonymity and confidentiality, and risk assessment) practices of documentation before, during, and after the testimonial process can be flouted by journalists, human rights activists, government officials, nongovernmental organization personnel, and researchers in their pursuit of recording wartime rape. Hence, survivors can experience a double set of transgressions—first of sexual violence, and then being retraumatized through the recording of their testimonies through insensitive and unethical means. This can lead to a critical disconnect between survivors' needs and transitional justice processes.

<HDA>Project Description</HDA>

<FL>The project that emerged from my initial research involves the creation of interviewing guidelines, a graphic novel, an animated film, and a website (Mookherjee and Keya 2019) to assist those taking testimonies from survivors. One of the central findings of my book *Spectral Wound* was how survivors of sexual violence found the process of giving testimonies to be an equally transgressive process with negative consequences when ethical practices are not followed by those recording their experiences. The goal of this project was and is to contribute to the welfare of survivors by ensuring their process of giving testimonies does not prove to be another source of trauma along with the past experiences of sexual violence. This can be possible by making academic work more accessible to nonacademic individuals and organizations and applying the research findings of *Spectral Wound* among them.</FL>

After the publication of my book in 2015 and of its South Asian version in 2016, I was invited to have a book launch event at the Centre for Women, Peace and Security at the London School of Economics (LSE) in October 2016. The panelists for the book launch included

academics as well as NGO leaders and government officials. I was also invited to speak at the Dhaka Literary Festival in November 2016 about the book and also launch the South Asian edition. I took this invitation as an opportunity to initiate the first collaborative workshop with my partners Research Initiatives Bangladesh (RIB) as well as invited participants, which included survivors who were in the public eye, academics, researchers, government officials, policymakers, NGO representatives, feminists and human rights activists, journalists, filmmakers, and photographers.

To be mindful of the survivors' concerns and not sensationalize their experiences for the purpose of testimonies, it is essential to have a set of guidelines to record their experiences. Guidelines that serve as a list of ethical practices were codeveloped through these workshops and are visualized through various illustrations in a graphic novel, making them more accessible. These guiding principles help to raise questions among those seeking to record testimonies. Before the first workshop, I had started developing storyboards and was collaborating with Najmunnahar Keya (a Bangladeshi visual artist) to develop the graphic novel. Before the November 2016 workshop, I predistributed a set of guidelines based on my monograph; we developed these further based on the workshop participant feedback. In the second half of the workshop, we developed the initial plans for the graphic novel.

After that first workshop, we further developed the guidelines via email, and the graphic novel came together through online exchanges across a six-hour time difference over a span of two and a half years, with support from the Economic and Social Research Council's Impact Acceleration Account and Durham University's Research Impact Fund. After five consultative workshops in Bangladesh (RIB) and the United Kingdom (UK) (Centre for Women, Peace and Security, LSE), we coproduced the guidelines, graphic novel, and animated film in collaboration

with various stakeholders in Bangladesh and the UK, with support and participation by the Ministry of Liberation War Affairs of the Government of Bangladesh and the UK's Foreign and Commonwealth Office's Preventing Sexual Violence in Conflict Initiative (PSVI). The novel, film, and guidelines can be used by those who record testimonies of sexual violence in conflict (researchers, human rights activists, feminists, lawyers, filmmakers, photographers, journalists, writers) and future researchers and activists. It would also generate interest on sexual violence during conflict and enable sensitization of these issues among children (twelve years and above).

I have a long-term interest in ethics, and as the ethics officer of the Association of Social Anthropologists of UK and the Commonwealth (ASA) from 2007 to 2012, I completely updated the ethics code in 2011 through a long consultative process with ASA members. I have also been part of the ethics committee of the World Council of Anthropological Associations. These engagements with ethics were brought out in my monograph and in turn in the guidelines, graphic novel, and film. I was also inspired by the University of Toronto Graphic Ethnography series as well as various American Anthropological Association panels on this theme. The graphic novel was also made part of the Royal Anthropological Institute's *Illustrating Anthropology* series.[3] The graphic novel follows the debates involved in creating these anthropological ethics codes and applies them in the context of sexual violence during conflict. The graphic novel follows *Spectral Wound* in utilizing a political and historical analysis to highlight the varied experiences of wartime rape during 1971.

Through an intergenerational story, the graphic novel opens with Labonno/Labony needing to do a school project on family memories of the 1971 Bangladesh War. When coming to ask her grandmother, she wakes the latter from one of her frequent nightmares. What follows is her grandmother's (Nanu/Rehana) narration of the history of *birangona*. Her mother, Hena,

also tells her of the oral history project through which they tried to collect testimonies. This leads them to talk about the various points that need to be covered and incorporated into ethical guidelines to record testimonies of sexual violence during conflict. Hidden in these discussions of the guidelines, Labonno discovers an intricate secret family history. The graphic novel highlights the ten guidelines through which anthropological concepts and ethnographic manifestations related to ethics, stigma, honor, and shame are visualized. The purpose is to suggest ways for activists and researchers to document accounts of wartime rape and avoid exacerbating conditions of survivors.

Through long-term ethnographic research, participant observation, and engagement with ethics, it was possible to explore what transitional justice meant for the survivors of sexual violence and their families. On reading the graphic novel/reviewing the film, a survivor said:

> <EXT>We cried and laughed on reading this book and seeing this film. It should be read and seen by all children and their parents. By reading this book and seeing this film children will not question the war again. No one will question who fought, and no will ever give *khota*/scorn to *birangonas*. Along with children, their parents would read, their mothers would read, and they would get to know about the war. All our stories are here in this book, and I want this book to be in every school in Bangladesh so that all children know about us. (Rural *birangonas* and their children)</EXT>

A sexual violence survivor from the Denis Mukwege Foundation said:

<EXT>The format of this approach is so inspiring, educative with a pinch of compassion in the telling of the shared experiences of the *Birangona*. As a "survivor" myself, I still cannot claim and own that word upon myself. During the Luxembourg retreat we had a session on what do we address ourselves. Globally in the network, the Colombian and Guatemalan women preferred to use and to be addressed as victims, while the majority of the women related to the word survivors. But for a government to decide to honour their victims by naming the *Birangona*, right there from the start stigma is addressed effectively and beautifully, even though there is still a lot to be done in our societies today after such recognition. (Email communication, May 2020)</EXT>

<Insert Figure 17.1 here>

<CAP>Figure 17.1. A page from the graphic novel *Birangona: Towards Ethical Testimonies of Sexual Violence during Conflict*. © 2019 Nayanika Mookherjee and Najmunnahar Keya.</CAP>

<HDA>Implementation and Anthropologist's Role</HDA>

<FL>The guidelines, graphic novel, and website were launched by survivors, their families, and the Minister of Liberation War Affairs in August 2018 and April 2019 in Bangladesh, and at the Centre for Women, Peace and Security in May 2019. The survivors and various organizations reviewed earlier versions of the guideline and graphic novel and received hard copies and online versions of the graphic novel and film.</FL>

As an anthropologist, I approached this work by highlighting the reality on the ground rather than identifying established and assumed facts relating to silence, stigma, shame, and trauma—which are often deemed to be the effect of wartime sexual violence. As a result, counter

to the prevalent assumption of silence relating to wartime rape, my ethnography highlighted the public memory of wartime rape. Use of the archival materials interspersed among the sketches of the graphic novel brought alive the relevance of documents from nearly fifty years ago. This also enabled me to counter the limited understanding of the impacts of wartime rape whereby the raped woman is only understood to be an "abnormal," horrific, dehumanized victim, abandoned by her kin. Instead, the graphic novel highlights the lives and experiences of various *birangonas* and how they have dealt with wartime sexual violence. As a result, the concepts of honor, silence, shame, and stigma are understood through idioms relevant to various survivors. The graphic novel also highlights the various socioeconomic and politico-historical dynamics within which the ideologies of gender, honor, and shame are practiced among the *birangonas* and which cannot be understood homogenously.

Viewed through another lens, the project shows that oral history accounts and interviews can be cross-referenced through secondary documents like land records. We find that the land of those who underwent sexual violence during the war was also appropriated by powerful local forces after the war. As a result, stigma and shame can often be used to keep the weak in their position and strengthen the strong (Mookherjee 2006).

A focus as well on the postconflict experiences highlights the continuum of violence, the various connotations of trauma, and the varied effects of sexual violence on the lives of the *birangonas* and their families. For example, sex worker Chaya Dutta feels she was raped because she was made vulnerable by the death of her mother; she feels that if her mother had been alive, she would have protected her. For Shireen, her trauma is that she cannot talk about her first husband to her second husband; she married the latter after being raped during the war and after her first husband was killed. Rural landless woman Moyna Karim was caught and raped when

she was cutting fish during the war, and she has never cut fish since. The sculptor *birangona* Ferdousy Priyobhashini was the protagonist war heroine who was present in various national commemorations but was still called a collaborator after the war. This is because she could not flee the country as she had to sustain her young siblings and widowed mother. She went to work every day, which was also the site where she was regularly raped. Many assumed she was collaborating with the Pakistani army, not realizing she did not have an opportunity to escape.

Feedback about the project is still being collected and implemented on an ongoing basis. This feedback is gathered through public testimonials as well as social media posts, video recordings, and letters from stakeholders in both Bangladesh and the UK. Feedback also informs how the guidelines and graphic novel are being implemented by various stakeholders across the world.

There have been unanticipated challenges along the way. One concerned the time needed for government departments to approve the guidelines and graphic novel, even though officials had been quite positive about the two products. In addition, translating academic work into a visual form took significant time, and, honestly, it took me out of my comfort zone. Universities do not provide additional time for such work, and so disseminating this to nonacademic audiences had to be coordinated in conjunction with my existing commitments and duties.

<HDA>Outcomes</HDA>

<FL>This project has contributed directly to the welfare of survivors. For example, Drishtipat, an activist network seeking redress and compensation for thirteen war-affected women, used my research in a successful fundraising effort to collect $15,000, and this provided funds for daily

sustenance for these *birangona*s. In addition, there are several instances of secondary impacts in which my work was used by others to improve the understanding of the survivors.</FL>

Along with the survivor-led guidelines and graphic novel, the project has changed policies, practices, and perceptions.

<HDB>*Changes to Policy*</HDB

<FL>The research influenced the Government of Bangladesh's First National Action Plan (NAP) on Women Peace and Security (2019–22) as part of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs remit of adopting the landmark UN Security Council Resolution 1325 in 2000. Our research on how *birangonas* were addressed by the Bangladeshi government is foundational for the history of the country and the women, peace, and security narrative. Our research brought out archival documents and ethnographic accounts not available in any other documents before. In addition, the Bangladesh Ministry of Liberation War Affairs is reviewing formalization of the guidelines and graphic novel into ministry policy.</FL>

The Prevent Sexual Violence Initiative team with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office is using our guideline and graphic novel and hence directly linking to our research to inform the extensive consultation and formulation of the Murad Code (named after 2018 Nobel Peace Prize laureate Nadia Murad), which is a global code of conduct for the documentation and investigation of conflict-related sexual violence.

<HDB>*Changes in Practice*</HDB>

<FL>Various organizations working with survivors have confirmed that they are using the graphic novel and guideline to train their personnel regarding the process of recording

testimonies of sexual violence. These include international NGOs such as the Dr. Denis Mukwege Foundation, Eyewitness to Atrocities, International Alert, Amnesty International, Survivors Speak Out Network, and Institute for Social Care Excellence, as well as Bangladeshi NGOs, museums, writers, artists, and the media (the *Dhaka Tribune*). </FL>

The Dr. Denis Mukwege Foundation (the key international organization on sexual violence in conflict; Mukwege was the 2018 Nobel Peace Prize co-winner with Nadia Murad) stated: "We have incorporated these in our own guidelines and have distributed it in our survivor networks; this contributes to the social welfare of survivors by ensuring the testimonial process doesn't harm them." Bangladeshi NGOs like Ain O Shalish Kendra (ASK) notes: "This graphic novel has not only raised consciousness about the ways in which birangonas are continuing their lives. It is also a fantastic medium of teaching us how to avoid retraumatizing the survivors and record their testimonies with caution." Research Initiatives Bangladesh has used the guidelines effectively to train their personnel and collected testimonies among Rohingya refugees, and it has also used them to train Asian human rights defenders.

<HDB>*Changes to Perception*</*HDB*>

<*FL*>Our research has changed the perception of survivors and their families, as well as the perception of those who represent them. As mentioned earlier, survivors (who feature in the graphic novel) and their families have been hugely appreciative of the graphic novel.</FL>

The research has been instrumental in changing two plays that address the ways in which survivors of sexual violence should be represented. It directly influenced and changed the script of a play on the women raped during the Bangladesh war, staged by the theater group Komola Collective in the UK (2013–14) and in Bangladesh. By engaging with my findings, they were

able to reconceptualize ideas of trauma and stigma, as well as the historical and political context. The graphic novel and guidelines for testimony collection were also used by Research Initiatives Bangladesh in a project to prevent sexual and gender-based violence against Rohingya women refugees through interactive theater.

I have also been invited as a woman leader, speaker, and expert to various locations and events, such as Buckingham Palace, the British Broadcasting Company, the UK House of Lords, and the Global Summit to End Sexual Violence in Conflict. My research on gendered violence during wars was also shortlisted as a finalist for the Michelle Z. Rosaldo Book Prize from the Association of Feminist Anthropologists at the American Anthropological Association annual meeting. Above all, the feedback from the survivors makes this project worthwhile.

<HDA>The Anthropological Difference</HDA>

<FL>Ethnography revealed that as a result of unethical practices, survivors can experience a double set of transgressions when testifying about their violent experiences during wars. A focus on this by international relations, public health, or psychiatry would have tried to understand the context of sexual violence during conflict through sweeping terms like *silence*, *shame*, *stigma*, and *trauma*, thereby identifying women through their suffering only. The anthropological difference is rendered by anthropology's ability to unravel homogenous narratives to bring out a more holistic understanding. Hence, instead of using the oft-reified concepts of stigma, honor, and shame, the project identified, for example, the economic context of these concepts.</FL>

This project not only counters the claims of the prevalence of silence relating to sexual violence but also shows that sexual violence is intrinsically linked to political, racial, and historical contexts; additionally, enabling survivors to speak about their violent experiences

contributes to a public memory of events. The research highlights the varied contexts and everyday experiences of rape among survivors and how they develop resilience based on their contexts—something that needs to be kept in mind by researchers.

Other disciplines have approached sexual violence in conflict through a focus on horrific testimonies of sexual violence. Instead, this project's focus on postconflict experiences highlights the continuum of violence, the various connotations of "trauma," and the varied effects of sexual violence on the lives of the survivors and their families. This allows us to ethnographically identify the various "socialities of violence"—the various ways the past violence erupts socially—and through which *birangonas* live with this experience. As a result, instead of focusing on voyeuristic testimonies of sexual violence, which leads to retraumatization, ethnography allows us to highlight the "fragments" through which survivors refer to their violent, embodied experiences. This not only interrogates the global term *trauma* but also allows us to use language as an analytical tool to comprehend the experience of the survivors.

Anthropological interpretations of honor, silence, shame, and stigma are understood through idioms relevant to various survivors as they emerge in the graphic novel. For example, many non-anthropologists often assume stigma and shame to be inherent in Muslim communities and are a natural response toward all survivors of sexual violence during conflict. In the graphic novel, we show the socioeconomic and politico-historical contexts of the invocation of stigma by communities and argue that shame cannot be understood homogenously in all instances of sexual violence. The novel shows an instance when a *birangona* is wondering why people scorn her, and she realizes that since all the neighbors are poor, they are assuming she is becoming rich. Also, she realizes that using *khota*/scorn of her rape against her is a way to belittle and humiliate

her in the context of the land disputes that exist between families. These visualizations and various other illustrations show how the politico-historical and socioeconomic contexts of silence, honor, shame, and stigma are significant to understanding the postconflict context of survivors and to not assuming that these concepts are inherent in Muslim societies. Tracking these socioeconomic contexts enables researchers to address the well-being of survivors.

In short, through unethical practices, survivors can experience a double set of transgression when testifying to their violent experiences during wars. Those who document testimonies of wartime rape need to undertake this process ethically. Silence, stigma, honor, and shame among survivors needs to be understood through their historical, political, and economic contexts.

These guidelines and graphic novel, and now the film, have emerged from the experiences of violations of survivors. These outputs should also help us reflect on whether there is further need for recording of testimonies and if there are adequate secondary sources to provide the needed insight. While a longer time is advisable for those recording testimonies, those with less time should be able to provide a nuanced survivor perspective about the reasons for sexual violence, the varied contexts of testimonies, the use of language, and euphemisms and gestures by survivors to uphold their narrative. The development of the film has further enabled circulation; we have also been able to reach survivors in Colombia and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

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transnational adoption. Based on her award-winning book (*The Spectral Wound: Sexual Violence, Public Memories and the Bangladesh War of 1971* [2015 Duke University Press; 2016 Zubaan]), she has coauthored a survivor-led guideline, graphic novel, and animation film: *Birangona: Towards Ethical Testimonies of Sexual Violence During Conflict* (2019).</BIO>

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<HDA>Notes</HDA>

[1] For further details, see the bibliography for Brownmiller (1975), Tanaka (1996), Stiglmayer (1994), Taylor (1999), Baaz and Stern (2013), and Prunier (2005). In the UN Beijing Declaration of 1995, rape during war was declared to be a war crime. The Japanese government has also apologized to the comfort women.

[2] In Bangladesh, the events of 1971 are considered to be genocide, taking into account mass killings; impositions on culture, language, and religion; and national feelings during 1971.

[3] Portions of this graphic novel became part of the Royal Anthropological Institute's "Illustrating Anthropology" ongoing series, which explores human lives through visual works of anthropological research. See https://illustratinganthropology.com/nayanika-mookherjee/.