Memory

Nayanika Mookherjee

Durham University

nayanika.mookherjee@durham.ac.uk

Introduction

'Memory! How would you know it is true?'

I am often asked by others about what I work on: I respond that I work on the public memories of wartime sexual violence. This response to my answer – 'Memory! How would you know it is true?' - not only hints at the perceived unreliability of memory: this comment also reminds us that the evidence, sources and processes of historical memory – primarily through human recall in the past or present – are often suspected of being incorrect, imagined or constructed and hence questionable sources of evidence. In this context, where the validity of memory as evidence of a past is often interrogated, how are memories of violent events remembered, forgotten or remembered to be forgotten (Mookherjee 2006)? This is more so the case as the recall of violent events is always deemed to be difficult and fragmented. More specifically,what are the artefacts through which violent memories are recalled? How do they become part of history? What is the relationship between history and memory? In trying to explore the role of objects of memory and their relationship with global visual politics, this essay examines how the public memories of wartime sexual violence perpetrated during the Bangladesh war of 1971 are remembered through photography. In the process the chapter shows how visualizing wartime sexual violence contributes to the politics of a public memory of wartime rape, enabling the 'interrntionalising' of the issue and impacting in various ways on the public debate about the figure of the raped woman. Through this discussion, the limits of global visual politics are also identified. The key insight of this chapter is its attempt to show that rather than romanticizing either history or memory as distinctive, authentic tools, my work on the public memories of wartime sexual violence is a contribution to the scholarship which focuses on the interrelationship between

memory and history. I show how dominant historical accounts on sexual violence draw from the individual memories which are in circulation. And it is the circulation of private memories that provides the very terms of recall for the visualized dominant history of sexual violence. The legitimacy generated from these individual memories also highlights the limits of the visual nature of global politics.

Memory, History and Global Visual Politics

Memory is often situated in a hierarchy of credibility distinctive from history [See Halbawchs (1980) and Nora (1989) for different positions on this distinctiveness]. Memories been deemed to be contradictory ways of dealing with the past. History is considered to be objective, based on evidence and the official version of experiences, while memory is seen to be subjective and provided by fallible human subjects. History is thereby deemed to start when social memory is fading away. Also, history is meant to be a scholarship for the few while collective memory is shared by the whole community. Others have however distinguished true memory from artificial history. To Pierre Nora (1989:8), memory is the authentic vehicle of recalling the past, whereas to him, history is a reconstruction and incomplete. History as a usable past is based on a constant struggle between different power blocks who want to impose their idea of the past as the hegemonic and national one. Memory is seen to be the mode through which this hegemonic history can be resisted and alternative versions of history can be brought to the surface: the practises of remembering and writing are the means through which resistance is seen to be encoded.

In instances of violent events in global politics, it is often assumed that memories of atrocities are shrouded in silence. Memory-making thereby becomes the resistive process through which these untold stories can be brought to the surface and a suppressed, even subaltern account can be made part of history. Memory-making can occur through interviews, oral history projects. The accounts arising from these methods are then made part of objects which are seen to represent these memories. So, for example, intergenerational family memories, holocaust and World War II memories can be transmitted orally through stories and interviews. They can also be located in language, bodily practices and rituals. These accounts can also be represented through various material, external memories, whether as objects of memory like the poppy. Photographs, films, literature - as well as structure and organizations like that of memorials, museums and archives - can come to represent and/or exhibit different aspects of these memories. The processes of preserving

memories whether through that of remembering, silences, forgettings, contestations, reconciliation, and redress also highlight the objective of this memory-making. Finally, processes of memory-making seeks to establish the relationship between meaning and identity as expressed, claimed, and contested through representation of the past in voice and text. What is the role of visuality in this memory-making process? Does a visually rich object like a photograph enable stronger memorialisations particularly when the memories of violent pasts are in question? I explore these aspects of a visual global politics by examining the role of photographs in representing the memory of sexual violence perpetrated during the Bangladesh war of 1971.

Visualising wartime sexual violence

In late 1971, Bangladeshi photographer Naibuddin Ahmed took a photograph of a woman (Fig 1) who had been raped by the Pakistani army during the Bangladesh war of 1971. This photograph depicted the woman with her dishevelled hair and her crossed, bangle-clad fists covering her face. Smuggled out of Bangladesh, the photograph drew international attention to the Bangladesh war, through which East Pakistan became the independent nation of Bangladesh, a war in which rape was common. Faced with a huge community of rape survivors, the new Bangladeshi government in December 1971 publicly designated any woman raped in the war a *birangona* [meaning brave or courageous woman; the Bangladeshi state uses the term to mean "war heroine"; see Mookherjee (2015) for various connotations of *birangona* and a detailed discussion of this photograph with Naibuddin Ahmed, the photographer]. Even today, the Bangladeshi government's bold, public effort to refer to the women raped during 1971 as *birangonas* is internationally unprecedented, yet it remains unknown to many besides Bangladeshis.

Among many other images, Ahmed's photograph is iconic, symbolizing the horrors of 1971, connoting the supposed shame and anonymity of the raped woman. It is also one of the most oft-cited and widely circulated visual representations of the *birangona*. This image has been used on the cover of an English translation of a Bengali book on women's oral history of 1971 (Akhtar et al. 2001b). In the spring of 2008, a photographic exhibition titled *Bangladesh 1971* displayed this picture at the Rivington Place Gallery in Shoreditch, East London, as the visual "trace" of the raped woman of 1971 (Fig 2). In 2013-2014, a London-based theatre company Komola Collective announced its intention to stage a play on the *Birangona*: *Women of War,*

in United Kingdom and Bangladesh based on the testimonies collected from a group of poor *birangonas* in Sirajganj. It included Ahmed's photograph on its poster to announce the play (Fig 3). Unlike Ahmed's photograph, where the raped woman uses her hair (as well as her fists) to cover her identity, the theater group altered this photograph to portray the birangona as looking out through her disheveled hair. In this version, she holds up her fists in protest above her mouth while revolutionary women emerge out of the folds of her sari. The connotations of shame and anonymity in Ahmed's image have been replaced by the birangona's demands for justice for the killings and rapes of 1971.

Along with these and other photographs representing the raped woman, portrait photographs of *birangonas* also exist in large numbers. In the 1990s, portraitures of *birangonas* in newspapers accompanying their stories of wartime rape become the prevalent modes through which she is visualised (Fig 4). This not only brings the *birangona* out of the shadows of 'statistical anonymity' (Sekula 1982). These photographs provided the public with a face for and an idea of a *birangona*. After this moment of truth, those seeking to document the testimonies of rape in 1971 had to visualise the war-heroines through portraits. This is because the snapshot of the war-heroine elevated 'vision as the noblest sense' (Fabian 1983:106) and rendered 'a higher semiotic order to the photograph than the vagaries of the pen or the brush or the dishonesty of local testimony' (Pinney 1997:108).

The Ahmed photograph of the *birangona* of the 1970s brought the horrific events of 1971 to the attention of an international public. The portraiture photographs of the *birangonas* in the 1990s, brought to light the post-conflict life trajectory of the *birangona* and the still unresolved wounded history of Bangladesh. The visuality of these photographs not only represented the *birangonas* but precisely helped to constitute the image and idea of who the *birangona* is. If here, 'the memory museum is mostly a visual one' (Sontag 2004), what kind of recognition and meanings do these images legitimise? And what implications does such a role of visuality have on public debates on the *birangona*? Unravelling these questions would also lead us to the limitations of such a visually inflected global politics.

Limitations of Global Visual Politics

In attempting to ascertain the impact of memorialising by visualising a political event like wartime rape, I am reminded as to how various Bangladeshis from

different classes told me that they viewed the woman's dishevelled hair in Ahmed's photograph as signaling her 'abnormal' state after the rape. By 'abnormal' they refer to her being psychologically affected as a result of being raped. References to the photograph also directed me to the presence of a huge corpus of visual and literary representations of the *birangona* and the need to explore how they are interwoven with and contribute to the public memory of the history of rape in 1971. The circulation of this photograph and of other visual portrayals of the raped women of the Bangladesh war of 1971 underlines the presence of a public memory of wartime rape. It also suggests the importance in Bangladesh of visually identifying the raped woman. In fact, on a number of occasions during my fieldwork, people narrating encounters with the "raped women" would refer to the photograph: "Have you seen 'the famous hair photograph'? The raped woman covering her face with her fist and hair? The women we saw looked very much like that. They had become 'abnormal' (mentally unstable) as a result of the rape." This comment also suggests that in the public memory of rape there exist visual ways of identifying the raped woman as "abnormal." Here, these real-life encounters with the "abnormal" *birangona* intertwine with similar portrayals of the raped woman in the existing literary and visual representations to arrive at a sedimented image of who a *birangona* is. The image alone cannot create that sedimented image and a visual global politics cannot alone sustain performing and co-constructing the history of wartime rape. It is the cross reference of this image with one's experiential encounters that makes the 'abnormal' visuality of the *birangona* real.

Similarly, turning to the portraitures of *birangonas* prevalent in the 1990s, their photographs would always be accompanied by the caption '*birangona*' and a testimonial account of the event of rape. Hence, here the photograph alone would have been inadequate, as a woman could not be identified as war-heroine without her caption and testimonial account. The photograph thereby needed a supplementary text, a 'verbal register' (Sekula 1986:30). In the 1990s, journalists gave individuality to these images through testimonies, in order to overcome the inadequacies of visual empiricism. These long testimonies accompanying the *birangona* portraits were found in the press with headings: "*Birangona* Bokul in the Mental Hospital" (*Bhorer Kagoj* 13/5/98) (Fig 4) or "*Birangona* Rizia is leading a life of poverty" (*Doinik Songbad* 16/3/97).

The camera swept like a fishing-net throughout the country, capturing these faces of *birangonas* looking straight into the camera, erect, cautious, and cut off from their family members, everyday surroundings and activities. The 1990s testimonies typically begin with the commencement of the war in 1971, then describe the day of a rape, the names and number of Pakistani army personnel involved, the names of local collaborators, the response of family members, the psychological or physical ramifications of the attack, and a perfunctory mention of the kinship structure within which the woman would be located (or from which she would be dislocated) now. The conjunction of these portraitures with the testimony of rape and the absence of family members, common in newspaper accounts during the national days of commemoration, made them all part of the archival grid of the collective memory of rape and the war-heroine in the 1990s. In turn, the women themselves counted as *birangonas* when they linked or were linked to the aforementioned characteristic codes and 'marks' that make her a 'case'.

In thinking through the visual global politics of wartime rape it is thereby important to note that Ahmed's photograph of the *birangona* is enabled not just by being able to visualise her. The success of this visuality is dependent on the circulation of this image in different contexts: in the *Washington Post*, in Bangladeshi newspapers commemorating the war and in international exhibitions. It is its cross-referencing in different texts, contexts and times - with witness accounts - which has significantly contributed to the efficacy of this representation of the raped woman. Similarly, the portraiture images of the *birangonas* are only visually co-constructive with the event of wartime rape when they are placed alongside the captions of the images and the text of their testimonies.

That these repetitive memorialisation of the visuality of the 'abnormal' *birangona* has contributed to a skewed idea as to who is a *birangona* and what state she is in today, is revealed by the following questions I would be asked about my research by the left-liberal community. Mosammad Rohima Nesa, Kajoli Khatoon, Moyna Karim, and Rashida Khatoon,[i] like many other women, were raped by West Pakistani soldiers in their homes during the Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971. Four poor, landless women, they have lived since 1971 with their husbands and children in villages (Enayetpur and its neighbour) in a western district in Bangladesh where I spent eight months of my year long multi-sited fieldwork working among the four birangonas, their families and communities. During my fieldwork, when I would

return to Dhaka from Enayetpur, people—NGO activists, human rights lawyers, intellectuals, writers, journalists, academics, feminists who knew about my research—would invariably ask the following questions about the war heroines: Are they married? Do they have a family, children, *kutumb* (in laws)? Did their husband know of the incident of rape? My answer to these questions would amaze them: the poor, rural, and illiterate women continue to be married to their landless husbands with whom they were married even before 1971, *in spite* of the rape. These frequently occurring, repetitive questions point to a sedimented imaginary of the war heroine among the activist community. Just as the image in the hair photograph gives an idea of the birangona as "abnormal," various literary and visual representations have contributed to the perception that the war heroine's kin networks have abandoned her and her family has not accepted her as a result of the rape.

Conclusion

The significance of visuality in being a supplement to existing oral histories and memory-making is undoubted. That visuality in global politics has provided a trigger to seek justice for past violences is a significant fact. Infact oral and visual histories created the conditions which enabled various women to narrate their violent histories of 1971 and post-1971 life trajectory in Bangladesh. While drawing on oral and visual history, researchers also need to identify the limitations of depending solely on image. I am particularly cautious of how oral history, visual representations, testimony and memory is often invoked uncritically in retrieving 'untold stories' of a 'real past' and that speaking/having a voice/being imaged is alone deemed to be healing and contributing to an archive of memory. Instead, a visual global politics needs to explore the social life of these images to examine how images need to be intertwined with other contexts, texts, to perform or co-construct a global politics. Through this alone the political functions and the social ramifications of witnessing through images within national and international processes would be highlighted.

At the same time, it is important to ask the question what kind of victim is necessary for a visual global politics. In Bangladesh, the authentic victim is marked by 'trauma' which is determined by a physical condition resulting as a consequence of rape. It also identifies the real war heroine as one who has no familial and community support. The politics of remembrance here is based on an assumed impact of that of sexual violence, the consequential trauma and a necessary traumatised post-event trajectory of life story. Here the reinscription of personal stories into national and

international domain obscures the richness and complexities within which memories of visualities of global politics is located.

Notes

[i] All the names of *birangonas* and places have been anonymized.

References

Akhtar, S., S. Begum, H. Hossein, S. Kamal, and M. Guhathakurta, eds. 2001. *Narir Ekattor O Juddhoporoborti Koththo Kahini* [Oral history accounts of women's experiences during 1971 and after the war]. Dhaka: Ain-O-Shalish-Kendro.

Fabian, J. 1983. *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Halbawchs, M. 1980. *The Collective Memory*. Translated from the French by Francis J. Ditter. New York: Harper Colophon.

Mookherjee, N. 2006. "'Remembering to Forget': Public Secrecy and Memory of Sexual Violence in Bangladesh." *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 12 (2): 433–50.

Mookherjee, Nayanika 2015.*The Spectral Wound: Sexual Violence, Public Memories and the Bangladesh War of 1971.*' Foreword by Prof. Veena Das. Durham N. C.: Duke University Press.

Nora, P. 1989. "Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Memoire*." Translated by Marc Roudebush. *Representations*, no. 26: 7–25.

Pinney, C. 1997. *Camera Indica*: *The Social Life of Indian Photographs.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press and Reaktion Books.

Sekula, A. 1982. "On the Invention of Photographic Meaning." In *Thinking Photography*, edited by V. Burgin, 84–109. London: Macmillan.

Sekula A. 1986. "The Body and the Archive." *October* 39: 3–64.

Sontag, S. 2004. 'What Have We Done?' *Guardian, May 24, 2004.*

BIO: Nayanika Mookherjee is a Reader of Socio-Cultural Anthropology in Durham University. She has published extensively on anthropology of violence, ethics and aesthetics. Recent publications include *The Spectral Wound. Sexual Violence, Public Memories and the Bangladesh War of 1971* (Foreword by Veena Das; Duke University Press, 2015), guest editing the special issue on *Aesthetics, Politics,*

Conflict (*Journal of Material Culture*, 2015), The Self in South Asia (*Journal of Historical Sociology* 2013) and co-editing (with Christopher Pinney, 2011) the *JRAI* (*Journal of Royal Anthropological Institute*) Special Issue: 'The Aesthetics of Nation'. Currently she is finishing her manuscript: '*Arts of Reconciliation and the Bangladesh Liberation War*' (contracted with the Cultural Memory in the Present Series, Stanford University Press). Her new research is on transnational adoption and conflict.