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## **Violated Bodies and Truncated Narratives: Mapping the Changing Contours of Violence and Eco-strategies of Resistance in Contemporary South Asian Women's Writings from Bangladesh**

By Nobonita Rakshit<sup>1</sup> and Rashmi Gaur<sup>2</sup>

### **Abstract**

The article aims to portray the traumas and sufferings of female war survivors in pre and post-1971 Bangladesh in Selina Hossain's novel *Hangor, Nadi, Grenade* (1976), translated into English as *River of My Blood* by Jackie Kabir in 2016. By using the feminist political-ecological perspectives of Wendy Harcourt and Arturo Escobar (2002), the constructive framework of the article aims to analyze the changing contours of violence in the spheres of the body, home, environment, and social-public arenas in the lives of the female war-survivors, especially the *Muktijoddhas* living in the fictional places of Haldi, Bangladesh as portrayed in the novel. Considering the postcolonial ecofeminist viewpoints of Shazia Rahman (2019), this article focuses exclusively on how the bodies of female war survivors as sites of violence become sites of resilience in the face of socio-cultural, political, and ecological injustices and resistance in the face of objectification in the name of ethnocultural nationalism through an attachment to the place Bangladesh and its more-than-human-environment. Additionally, the article seeks to demonstrate how bringing private violence into the public discourse through South Asian writings works as an intervention into the dominant narratives of patriarchal nationalism, gender discrimination, and biased social structures that have been materialized through honor killing, rape, murder, and verbal abuse, and provides a tool for depicting the symbolic, cultural, and epistemic violence that affects women in South Asia.

*Keywords:* 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War, Female war survivors, Feminist political ecology, Postcolonial ecofeminism, Body

### **Introduction: Women, War, and Violence in Bangladesh**

For writers of Bangladesh Anglophone literature, representing the experiences of violence of female war survivors caused by the Bangladesh Liberation Movement is a never-ending struggle, as they have to constantly negotiate between the dominant state-sponsored histories of patriarchal nationalism and people's lived and embodied experiences of the 1971 genocide. Nonetheless, an exploration into the literary narratives of contemporary Bangladeshi women writers brings out new patterns of writing strategies where the use of oral history establishes a tradition of writing that includes women's lived experiences of war and memories of the violence of female war survivors. Bangladeshi women writers, like other women writers from contemporary South Asia, seek to consolidate an ecologically oriented national identity of women war survivors, emerging from the ethnographic violence of neocolonial West Pakistan and masculinist erasure from their rightful place in history in postcolonial Bangladesh. They document these women's often unremembered contributions to the 1971 war, as well as the narratives of violence that are frequently shadowed, truncated, and stifled by engineered

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national histories. Their archiving projects document these silenced narratives, exhibiting the gendered experiences of war but also humanizing the war survivors with an agency often neglected, suppressed, and simply dismissed from mainstream academia. The female Mukhtijoddha,<sup>3</sup> who participated in the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War “both behind the scenes and on the front line” (Harrington, 2013, p. 9), is one such figure in Bangladeshi history who has been subjected to the brutal violence of rape, honor killings, family members’ deaths, murder, and verbal abuse. Many historiography projects regarding the violence of the 1971 war, such as *A History of Bangladesh* by Willem Schendel (2009), *The Blood Telegram: Nixon, Kissinger, and a Forgotten Genocide* by Gary J. Bass (2013), and *1971: A Global History of the Creation of Bangladesh* by Srinath Raghavan (2013) present the historical narratives based on the dedicated fight of the male *Mukhtijoddhas* along with the Indian armed forces, disregarding the personal experiences of women freedom fighters who were either directly involved in the conflict or indirectly affected by it. Even museums like Bangladesh National Museum, libraries like National Archive in Dhaka, and National Museum Library have been built and formed to eulogize the memories of male *Mukhtijoddhas* as liberation heroes. However, the experiences of Bangladeshi women who took part in the freedom movement by “providing food, clothing, and shelter to male Mukhtijoddha; tending to wounded soldiers; and hiding weapons in their homes... [taking] up arms and fighting directly against their enemy on the front line in combat positions” (Harrington, 2013, p. 9) have received little scholarly attention. They succumb to, to use Azra Rasid’s phrase, “selective remembering [...] in the service of a collective nationalist memory” (Rashid, 2019, p. 6).

Nonetheless, some of the literary women writers from Bangladesh attempt to bridge the gap between the dominant nationalist historiography, which glorifies the male *Mukhtijoddhas*, and the “specific memories... selective remembering, silencing and appropriating of women’s experiences in the widely circulated images of the 1971 genocide in Bangladesh” (Rashid, 2019, p. 3). While *Aami Birangona Bolchi* by Nilima Ibrahim (1996) (translated as *A War Heroine, I Speak* (2017) is a non-fictional collection of testimonies of rape survivors who point out the nationalist politics with the honor of heroism, *River of My Blood* (2016) by Selina Hossain is a fictional representation of the personal experiences of the protagonist Boori, who not only witnesses the unfolding of the war in the domestic space but also participates in it. Building upon Hossain’s novel, this article exclusively attempts to map how the contours of violence change in the spheres of the body, home, environment, and social-public arenas in the lives of female war survivors, especially the *Mukhtijoddhas* living in the fictional places of Haldi as portrayed in the novel.

In this broad context, the article deals with how literature as a medium can bring private violence into the public discourse through South Asian women’s texts and intervenes in the dominant narratives of patriarchal nationalism, gender discrimination, and biased social structures that have been materialized through honor killing, rape, murder, and verbal abuse. Literature provides a tool for depicting the symbolic, cultural, and epistemic violence that affect

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<sup>3</sup> *Mukhtijoddhas* are the liberation warriors of the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation Movement. This laurel is given to them in honor of their unrelenting struggles, self-sacrifices, and fortitude despite lack of proper military training, inadequate weaponry skills, poverty, anthropogenic crises like the 1970 cyclone, flood, and ensuing famine, and extreme physical abuse, looting, killing, and abduction “by the West Pakistani soldiers and by the Razakars (local Bengali and non-Bengali collaborators) within a span of 9 months” (Mookherjee, 2021, p. 588). Many female *Mukhtijoddhas* who were raped and impregnated by the West Pakistani soldiers were referred to as “*Birangona*,” a term coined by the then prime minister Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in the post-liberated Bangladesh (Rashid, 2019, p. 38). However, the appellation of *birangona*, which is supposed to provide the female *Mukhtijoddhas* “an honorary status and provide them with equal access to privileges in the public sector, such as education and employment rights granted to the male freedom fighters” (Pereira, 2002, p. 6), becomes a “signifier of shame and humiliation, and in many cases led to the refusal and rejection by the families” (Akhter, 2018, p. 97).

women in Bangladesh in particular and South Asia in general. Drawing largely from Yasmin Saikia's (2011) concept of "gendered violence of the war," which examines the interconnectedness between the 1971 war, the violation of women, and the making of Bangladesh, and Shazia Rahman's (2019) concept of "materiality of the place," which suggests how women in the face of utter violence connect with the nation through an attachment with the non-human environment, this article explores how the bodies of female war-survivors as sites of violence become sites of resilience in the face of socio-cultural, political, and ecological injustices and resist the objectification of ethnocultural nationalism through an attachment to the place Bangladesh and its more-than-human environment. The article further argues that the kind of ecocritical feminist lens strategically used in *River of My Blood* requires urgent critical attention not simply to comprehend the intersectional identity of the female war survivor who bears a relationship with her environment but also to enable the readers to confront the trauma of partition, creating an alternate history of the 1971 Liberation Movement that at once complements and stands apart from historical writing.

### **Contextualizing Selina Hossain's *River of My Blood***

Women have experienced direct consequences of a rapidly increasing religious and cultural nationalism, patriarchal hegemony, lack of proper education and employment opportunities, unpreparedness for natural hazards, class partitions, ecological exploitation, and economic impoverishment. Literary writers from Bangladesh – Shaheen Akhtar, Selina Hossain, Monika Ali, Tehmima Anam, Naila Kabir, Rizia Rahman, and Taslima Nasrin – are trying to recuperate the undocumented narratives of 1971 genocidal violence on women distinctly and uniquely, promising a redefinition of the identity of a *Muktijoddha*. Selina Hossain, an emphatic voice from Bangladesh, writing in Bengali, exhibits the interrelation of personal and political, domestic space and battlefield, epistemic violence against women and state-sponsored politics of silencing women war-heroes to restore women's experiences of eco-social injustices and patriarchal nationalism in her fictional world of *Hangar, Nadi, Grenade*, later translated as *River of My Blood* by Jackie Kabir. Even in the post-independence era, Hossain contends, the condition of the war-torn place and its survivors has not improved much. In many of her interviews, she has emphasized her discontent with the direct and indirect social and political suppression of women writers who are supposed to romanticize the past, dismissing women's resilience, strength, and resourcefulness manifested during the crisis of war. Hossain attempts to debunk the monopoly of considering male *Muktijoddhas* as the source of national honor, part of patriarchal values, and the lamp-bearer of communal identities. Hossain also questions sweeping generalizations about women war survivors as a shameful part of brutal nationalism by advocating an alternative way of representing women's role in the 1971 war. Her text urges the inclusion of women's experiences of war-violence in the cultural imagination of post-liberated Bangladesh. Therefore, to counter the monolithic official historiographic discourse, Hossain documents the lived and embodied experiences of ordinary people by harvesting the memories of a war mother, whose extraordinary experiences of war and loss as unfolded in the fictional ruralscape of Haldi become an essential archive of the usually unwritten and often ignored voices. According to Hossain, the thoughts and actions of ordinary people are "influenced and controlled by the state, not always directly but indirectly by its policies and various apparatuses. My novels examine this relationship. But my approach is not polemical. I prefer personal [...], my fiction combines the personal and the political" (Interview with Mayank Bhatt, 2013).

Selina Hossain's *River of My Blood* is the outcome of an alternate history documentation project in which Hossain records the personal narratives and experiences of a *Muktijoddha*, whose tale of participation, contributions, and sacrifice in the 1971 Liberation Movement is recounted to Hossain by her professor. Hossain then weaves the real-life

experiences into a fictional narrative. Regarding the genesis of the present novel, Hossain, in an interview with Jackie Kabir (2009), recounts an anecdote of her college days, particularly a day when her professor Abdul Hafiz told a story of a woman from Jessore, Bangladesh. She demonstrated how her professor insisted that she write a story regarding the woman in Kaliganj, Jessore, handing over her only son to the Pakistani army to shelter the *Muktijoddhas*. The novel *River of My Blood*, written in the background of the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation Movement, is a coming-of-age story of the protagonist Boori, her experiences during the Liberation Movement, her marriage and troubled pregnancy, her loss of two sons in *Muktijuddha*, her struggle to protect the freedom fighters at the cost of her disabled son's life, the changed lives in Haldi during the war, her lifelong friendship with a minstrel named Nita whose songs soothe her pain of social limitations and loss, her concern for the human and non-human environment triggered by the famine and war, her participation in the war and her dream of rebuilding her village after the war, and finally, her sense of meaninglessness for the earned Liberation. The novel vividly depicts Boori's social stigmatization in her childhood for her free spirit and strong desire to be educated, for her late marriage and pregnancy in her adulthood, and for her earnest desire to participate in the freedom fight in her old age in pre-independence Bangladesh. Unfolding in the form of Boori's reminiscing of war-time Bangladesh, the novel emphasizes the immediate changes Haldi had to encounter when the West Pakistani Army started settling camps outside the village and abducting young boys whom they suspected to be associated with the *Muktijoddhas*. Although violations in the form of economic extortion, malnourishment, religious obliteration, political exclusion, and poor living conditions were already prevalent in East Pakistan, the novel recounts how the violence against women was exacerbated after West Pakistan refused to transfer political power to East Pakistan, consequently starting Operation Searchlight on March 25, 1971. After nine months, on December 16, 1971, with the "military support of India, death of three million people, ten million refugees, 200,000 raped women, [and] hundred thousand stateless Biharis, 'Bangladesh, meaning 'Bengal nation' was created" (Rashid, 2019, p. 25). Apart from the genocide, mass killings, and displacement, the novel reflects how women become victims of direct violence where young girls and women of any religion are raped and killed, internally displaced and forced to flee, and forcibly abducted to military camps to be sexually assaulted.

Further, the societal disgrace imposed on women by believing them incapable of participating in the battle and relegating them to "symbols of national and family honour" exacerbates their violent experiences (Butalia, 2000, p. 111). These women are constantly made aware of the necessity of staying within the confinements of home. Therefore, narrating how the war encroaches on the domestic space through gendered violence, the novel shifts the focus "from the external story of the war to the internal dimension of people's memories" to trace the multiple ways women faced the violence of 1971 and to "question the dominant constructions of official national histories to create a new narrative 'humanizing' victims and perpetrators, the people of South Asia, and reclaim the capacity to write a people's history" (Saikia, 2011, pp. 6-8). By deciphering stories of women like Boori, Nita, and Ramija, who, amid an emergency situation, maneuver the critical circumstances of war, a humanitarian crisis, and ecological exploitations, a non-human crisis in everyday life by their attachment to the "materiality of the place" (Rahman, 2019, p. 21), Hossain not only depicts the vulnerability of women but also presents their strategies of survival in the middle of oppression and subjugation in the spheres of the body, home, environment, and social-public space.

### **Violated Bodies, Violated Environment: Understanding the Gendered Violence and the Materiality of Place**

Mapping the changing contours of violence against female *Muktijoddhas* in Bangladesh in the present article owes its inspiration to Yasmin Saikia's "gendered violence," which links

war violence to the brutal exploitation of women both during and after the war; and to Shazia Rahman's concept of "postcolonial ecofeminism," which offers a strategy for mediating the memories of violence and engendering an alternate way of survival through an environmental attachment to the nation. Feminist historicist Yasmin Saikia's seminal work *Women, War and the Making of Bangladesh: Remembering 1971*, published in 2011, focuses on "how women experienced the war, how in their stories, they narrate their experiences in polyvalent narratives that continuously make us aware of the attack on the feminine self that was under siege during the war but could not be destroyed" (p. xviii). As a result of the "peculiarly skewed representation of the war as a nationalist life and death struggle" and disengagement with women's trauma caused by terrorizing, brutally sexualizing, and marginalizing them in the war, a "narrative of the hidden memories" is required both "to make sense of gendered violence in the war" and "to explore how people process violence and the lessons they learn from it" (Saikia, 2011, p. 5). In order to explain gendered violence, Saikia uses an oral history project to recount how the West Pakistani Army used a reactive strategy against the local rebels, the old and young freedom fighters, and women by punishing, murdering, and raping in the hope that the "tactics of fear and extreme punishment and humiliation of Bengali honour would prevent future recruitment of Muktis" (Saikia, 2011, p. 51). The lived experiences of rape, abduction, killing, and social dishonor are responded to with greater epistemic violence where the patriarchal Bengali nationalism silences the sources of knowledge of women's experiences and produces a conventional history through militarization, Islamic socialism, purity narratives, imposed silence, media censorship, and official memory, thereby demanding a glorified version of this war in South Asia. Saikia notes, "Purity and impurity, belonging and exclusion were worked out and physically carried out on the body of the women, the site of national dishonour and power for men to control the imagining of a new 'liberated nation'" (2011, p. 61). Amid the representational crisis created by official history and glorified patriarchal nationalism, if the lived and embodied experiences of violence of female *Muktijoddhas* are not archived through the cultural medium, "we will continue to remain wilfully ignorant and refuse to learn how genocide, politicide, or mass killing originate and perpetuate painful experiences on the self and others" (Saikia, 2011, p. 60). However, these violent narratives do not reflect Bangladeshi women's lack of commitment to their homeland. Rather, bearing all the violence, these women continued to participate in warfare through their attachment to the "materiality of the place" on which Bangladesh is mapped. Therefore, to comprehend the history of the 1971 genocide from the perspective of "civilians, especially women, children, the elderly and the disabled, who are often the victims of violence" (D'Costa, 2011, p. 4), it is vital to comprehend the materiality of the place Bangladesh.

Postcolonial ecofeminist Shazia Rahman (2019), writing in the context of Pakistan, expands this notion of "materiality of the place" to the concept of women's environmental attachment to place, which precipitates women's lived experiences amidst the violence of patriarchal social structures, religious nationalism, and human and non-human exploitation. To explain women's "non-nationalist attachment to place" (2019, p. 3), Rahman notes, "the material reality of the place indicates the way in which people live with each other, deal with their environment and animal others, and intuit their sense of place and relationship with the more than human" (2019, p. 21). To intervene in the "politics of active national forgetting" (Saikia, 2011, p. 7), which further amplifies their "social death" (Bagchi & Dasgupta, 2003, p. 27), the women of Bangladesh embrace an alternate way of attachment to the nation during the 1971 war crisis through tending and protecting the animals, sheltering the *Muktijoddhas*, keeping the family together, containing grief, putting closure on inexplicable deaths, and attempting to limit the violence that such a circumstance ultimately unleashes. In Bangladesh, it's important to understand these "micro-narratives" of lived experiences because, as Bina D'Costa (2011) says,

[...] by failing to understand the macro-narratives of statebuilding projects through the micro-narratives of ordinary people, the elites (the political, cultural, military, traditional or other groups responsible for constructing the official discourse) obstruct any chance of conversation, reconciliation and sustained peace between different communities – groups that, nonetheless, have to co-exist. (p. 3)

Among all the violence, focusing on women's environmental attachment to the nation initiates a conversation between the historical event and women-in-crisis, reconciliation between the traumatic past and wounded present, and sustained peace that comes from "depoliticizing of their [women's] experiences and concepts of history that are shaped by forgetting traumatic experiences" (Saikia, 2011, p. 74). Here, the postcolonial ecofeminist lens becomes necessary more than ever to combine the analysis of nationalist and religious identification with the environmental ways of belonging to Bangladesh, drawing "our attention to both the extraction economy and the atrocities that the state of [West] Pakistan committed against its own land and citizen, especially women" (Rahman, 2019, p. 17). According to Rahman, the "feminist novel's eco-strategies" (Rahman, 2019, p. 17) do not define a particular genre where the theoretical and structural oppression of women and nature can be essentially associated. Rather, this lens works as a framework to understand how many women's experiences of violence in war are always accompanied by "not only violent eviction from their bodies, but also the loss of power over their own bodies" (Bagchi & Dasgupta, 2003, p. 16). What Bagchi and Dasgupta (2003), writing in the context of the gendered experience of partition in Eastern India, suggest is that, in the gender-specific violence of war, apart from the violence of rape, honor killing, verbal abuse, and social disgrace, women lose power over their own bodies by being touched by the enemy. A prerequisite for the new national belonging and "membership in the national community, and middle-class domesticity, demanded that women not only live in the right country and follow the right religion but also possess the right body" (Bagchi & Dasgupta, 2003, p. 18).

Contrasting this concept of pure and chaste women, the postcolonial ecofeminist lens delineates the contours of gendered violence, which is not simply limited to women's bodies that "struggle for autonomy, for reproductive and sexual integrity and rights, for safe motherhood, for freedom from violence and sexual oppression" (Harcourt & Escobar, 2002, p. 8). While women are silenced and ignored, their various forms of physical oppression are ignored, or their bodies become "the only place to make their needs, sufferings, and joys visible" (2002, p. 8). Violence is also materialized through the home, environment, and the social-public sphere. According to Harcourt and Escobar (2002), women can experience the home both as a safe and empowering space as well as a site of violence and suppression (p. 9). It is a crucial terrain where power relations are negotiated and undervalued labor is produced. In a war-like situation, women are reduced to the role of housewives and victims, wondering what they could possibly do. Even when they participated crucially in achieving independence as fighters, informants, nurses, weapon smugglers, trainees in guerrilla warfare, and sheltering freedom fighters, they were compelled to return to their traditional household roles as protected and vulnerable beings in the post-war period (D'Costa, 2016, p. 95). Such violence is expanded to the sphere of the environment, where women face violation through "a multi-layered web of economic, political and social relations" (Harcourt and Escobar, 2002, p. 9). When the male family members joined the guerrilla operations during the 1971 Liberation Movement, through "turning the domestic skills into war strategies," women handled the issues of livelihood, survival, and quality of life (Lauret-Taft, 2020, p. 3). While explaining women's violence in the social public sphere, Harcourt and Escobar (2002) further assert that in the male-dominated social public sphere, women have limited access to make socio-political decisions and their gender-based concerns are either silenced or omitted from the patriarchal society (p. 9).

Harcourt and Escobar's (2002) concept of violence against women in the sphere of body, home, environment, and social-public space becomes explicitly apparent in the narratives of Boori and Ramija, the two generations of women in Hossain's *River of My Blood*, who are seen enduring the trauma and suffering of personal loss and socio-political disgrace. Though Boori is fascinated by how quickly her surroundings are changing as war approaches, Selim, her elder son, and the other male villagers regard her as useless in this rapidly changing socio-political scenario. Hossain (2016) writes, "Like a mother hen over her brood, Boori fussed, fretted, flurried. No one bothered to ask her help...The young men claimed that this great struggle of theirs against evil wasn't for old folks" (p. 96). With the war approaching, Salim leaves home to join the *Muktibahani*, leaving Boori and Ramija, his wife, alone to take care of themselves. To Ramija, who is only used to the kitchen fire, "the blaze that charred the country caught her napping. The sound of gunshots was new to her. She had spotted the odd hunter shooting birds, but never seen people actually being shot dead" (p. 15). Every time the Pakistani soldiers invade Boori's home or the village of Haldi to ask for Salim and Kalim or other *muktijoddhas*, the young women, like Ramija and Phuli, being "afraid of their izzat," have to run "from the bank of the pukur to hide in the boroj nearby" (pp. 143-44). When Kalim is taken away by the West Pakistani sepoys to ferret out information regarding Salim's hideouts and bases and again brought back to Boori's home, Boori recounts how the soldiers brutally torture Kalim and mutilate a mother's "life's possession [...] love and affection" (p. 146).

In depicting the violence of war in Decca (now Dhaka), Bangladesh, Jalil recounts, "when I shut my eyes, I hear the TATA TATA of guns, I feel the heat of fire consuming the bodies, the wails of the women gang-raped in the hot silent night and the helpless screams of the dying" (p. 114). These women are terrified, oppressed, and assaulted with fear of violence. When Phuli is dragged out of her home at night, Boori and Ramija "listened attentively. They [the West Pakistani soldiers] made out a rustling sound. After a while the moaning stopped as though someone had gagged a women's mouth with a strong hand. Then, they could hear a whimper and grunts. A body was dragged. The sound gradually died down" (p. 158).

However, along with the soldiers' atrocities, what has shaken Boori is the cowardly face of patriarchal nationalism that boasts of protecting women's honor, but "no one dared to raised their voices against such brutality. No one raised a protest or cried foul play. No individual or group of villagers. Phuli was dragged away without resistance" (p. 158). The army ambush, the crashing of grenades, the clattering of machine guns, the death of young martyrs, and the sexual assault of young girls and women in the name of nationalism led Boori to emerge as a "weapon...to mow down countless visible foes" (p. 168). Thus, considering Salim and Kalim's sacrifice inadequate, Boori decides to "pay her personal tribute" (p. 168). Therefore, on the night of Poush, when Kader and Hakim, two *muktijoddhas* in the novel, ask for shelter to save themselves from the hungry feline-like Pakistani sepoys, Boori hides them and, in turn, sacrifices her son Rais. Hossain (2016) writes,

Boori wanted to cry her heart out. She felt like going into the courtyard, but was petrified. She had to keep an eye on two more lives that were equally precious. Kader and Hakim would fight on and avenge the deaths of thousands of Kalim. They were fighting for the freedom of Sonar Bangla, at the cost of their own lives. Boori was no more Rais's maa, she was the mother of all Bangladeshis. (p. 188)

This terrible situation of these war survivors shows how important the alternate history of independence is, in which stories of violated bodies are looked at and, as this article will show, how these bodies become sites of resistance and resilience.



### Resistance, Resilience, and the Politics of Survival

In her narrativization of the experiences of traumatic violence of women war survivors, Hossain, through her postcolonial ecofeminist lens, documents the lived and embodied experiences of women in postcolonial Bangladesh by focusing both on their suffering, sacrifices, and traumas and on their resistance against the socio-political exploitation of family and community members, extortion of the place, and exhaustion of the more-than-human-environment during and after the Liberation movement. When the males of rural households crossed the border to join the *Muktibahini* for guerrilla training, leaving the females to fend for themselves, agriculture was severely affected, and female survivors like Boori dealt with the shortage of food. Boori recounts, “She heard a faint voice calling ‘Maa, Maa,’ begging for food [...] She would hear this cry during droughts, famines and floods. Screaming for food was Haldi’s kismet [...] she conjured up the starving villagers screaming madly for something to kill their hunger pangs” (Hossain, 2016, pp. 105-6). Even when Kalim was killed, young women were raped, the animals were stolen and slaughtered, the stored paddy seeds were destroyed, people were killed mercilessly, and Ramija and her son were taken away to Ramija’s father’s home, Boori refused to leave the land, as “the village is her only home. Since childhood, the dust, the trees and shrubs, the animals have been my family” (p. 111). Amidst the atrocities of violence, Boori feels solace when she comes near the pond and submerges herself in it. Thus, when the male-domination and religious nationalism attempt to silence women’s participation in the war, the female war survivors participate in the war through an engagement with the materiality of the place and find strategies of survival through an attachment to the non-human environment. Their environment-based national identity is more explicitly presented through Nita’s traditional Baul songs, which transcend Boori from the pains of loss in the war, strategically used by Hossain to “create new humanistic vocabularies and vernacular concepts such as *insaniyat* and *manushyata*, facilitating linkages between multiple religious communities” (Saikia, 2011, pp. 10-11). Hossain also seeks to facilitate a shared sense of humanity where different communities, separated by hate and nationalist politics, live side by side, eliminating differences and generating resistance against the limitations of official history. Nita Bairagi, a “Baul minstrel” (Hossain, 2016, p. 31) and a life-long friend of Boori, wanders along the road with her soulmate, “unmarried by choice, obeying no social code and going only where fancy took them” (p. 34). Even when, “in the name of Peace Committee,” the so-called patriots shoot the minstrels, set fire to their homes, rape them, steal their belongings, and brand them as “traitors” (p. 178), Nita keeps on singing for the country, tributing her music to “serve the nation” (p. 126). As Nita recalls,

That day was a watershed in our lives and we sang these patriotic songs across the country. Folks had the words of our songs on their lips and they would gather and ask us to sing for them. They’d join in the chorus and cheer on us. What a wonderful feeling that was—you cannot imagine the atmosphere. Our songs drove people crazy (p. 126).

Nita exhibits resilience to the violence through her songs, which carry a “magnetic pull” and whose rhythm in the “clatter of *dotara*” (Hossain, 2016, p. 122) and transcend the patriarchal and national boundaries. Her songs enable her to endure the pain of the death of her soulmate Akhile, the abduction and gangrape of her fellow minstrels, and the deaths of enormous innocent people, reviving humanity among the countrymen lost in the atrocity of violence.

Nita’s songs mesmerize Boori, transforming her subjectivity. Deprived of education in her childhood for being a girl, getting married against her will, losing her sons in the war, and having a high aspiration for an independent nation, Boori’s sense of belonging to the nation and place Bangladesh is mapped through her knowledge and assimilation with the materiality of the place, resisting the victimhood bestowed upon the war-survivors by the patriarchal and

pseudo-nationalist society. Boori's knowledge of the poverty, drought, flood and famine-stricken Haldi (pp. 105-6), migration of the villagers (95), and connection with the non-human environment are formulated from her everyday lived experiences. Her attachment to the place, people, and non-human environment helps Boori carry on her sanity amid the "thoughts of loot, blood, fire, shooting and killing [that] flashed before her eyes" (p. 163). Her body, which endures the pain of loss, sacrifice, deprivation, and desolation, becomes a site of resilience when she dreams of rebuilding homes and schools (p. 179), of the return of Salim as a "war hero" (p. 191), and leading the violated people "to Bangla's new dawn" (p. 191).

This shift of focus from the dominant history of the 1971 Liberation Movement that valorizes male heroes to the history of gendered partition redefines the stereotypical definitions of *Muktijoddha*, but also answers the question—"Do women have a country?"—posed by Ritu Menon in the context of gendered violence during the 1947 Indo-Pak partition. Menon (2002) contends that "women, who know that the weapons of war are not very different from the weapons of peace, will wonder whether, if ever, they will be able to exit their communities and claim their countries" (p. 61), and Rahman (2019) emphasizes a "non-nationalist attachment to place" (p. 3). Selina Hossain (2016), through her narrative strategies, intertwines the experiences of national, religious, and socio-political suffering of violence and place-based, material, and ecological resistance, providing the war-survivors with subjectivity and agency. In this connection, Saikia (2011) contends, "If forgetting is imposed as a strategy to hide the haunting memories that cannot be revealed without destroying our romance with nationalism, then the trauma of gendered violence can never be separated from aspects of nationalism" (p. 12). Therefore, Hossain's production of an alternate history of the 1971 Liberation movement to unfold the silenced and undocumented narratives of female war survivors should not be considered a manufactured truth fabricated to debunk the official narratives. Instead, Hossain's creative art of listening to the stories of traumatic encounters in the everyday lives of female war survivors highlights the humanistic and ethical aspects of the process of recording their traumatic experiences of gendered violence.

## Conclusion

Unlike a historian, who emphasizes official documents and objective historical truth, Selina Hossain, as a literary writer, combines fact and fiction, historical narratives and personal testimonies, to write about the plight of war survivors in the "multi-layered, multifaceted history" of South Asia (Saikia, 2011, p. xiii). The article sees this literary historiography through a postcolonial ecofeminist stance as the source of historical knowledge production where the testimonies of female war survivors have been recorded to write a people's history of 1971. Hossain hopes that the new generation of South Asia can envision a legacy of women's contribution to the Liberation Movement through the eco-strategies of participation and resistance. As the memory of the war survivors is the principal tool to recreate the contours of violence, history, as it emerges here through the combination of nationalism and ecofeminism, is a lived, embodied, and personal history. In her book *Place and Postcolonial Ecofeminism* (2019), Rahman postulates that, unlike history, which represents "what is," "fictions represent what can be. Through fiction, women can represent both what is and what could be, the dangerous possibilities and the ideal. Fiction allows us to imagine suffering as well as joy. They help us feel empathy for others and imagine better ways to live and seek justice" (p. 16). What Rahman suggests is that, other than factual information, the strategic representations of how people feel and how they remember and resist traumatic experiences are of genuine importance. The unfolding of an alternate history intermingles with personal violence in the diegetic space of these feminist eco-texts, and public discourse unites personal narratives and political silencing, intertwining history and personal lives. The vivid description of the violence of women fosters among the readers a powerful experience of the traumatic past and dynamic

resilience, asserting agency “for a community living under the negative power of history’s politics” (Saikia, 2011, p. xiv). In other words, Hossain’s ecofeminist perspective in *River of My Blood* generates an ecocritically-inflected feminist nationalism, as articulated by Rahman, that broadens not only the concept of *Muktijoddha* but also adds a new epistemic practice of mapping the challenges of representing violence and eco-strategies of resistance in contemporary South Asian women writers.

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