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Breaking Down the *Birangona*: Examining the (Divided) Media Discourse on the War Heroines of Bangladesh's Independence Movement

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Rape, commonly used as a weapon of war, was long seen as an inevitable by-product of battle. Recent research finds that war itself is gendered and that the implications and consequences of violence in battle differ for women and men. Against this backdrop, this article explores the issue of wartime rape during Bangladesh's liberation movement against Pakistan in 1971. It examines the discourse surrounding the women who were raped in wartime and, after independence, awarded the title of "*birangona*" or "war heroine." It explores the representation of the *birangona* in the postwar Bangladeshi media, the media's role in challenging or reinforcing the discourse, and the implications of these for war heroines who lacked agency.

Introduction

Throughout history, war has been gendered, and its implications and consequences for women and men differ in terms of the sex-based nature of the various injuries and deaths caused to female and male bodies. The immediate aftermath and ultimate legacy of war also play out differently for the sexes. Women, regarded as carriers of culture whose bodies are symbols of the nation to be defended by men, are especially vulnerable in situations of battle, where their very identities as women come under threat. The common tactic of rape as a means of humiliating the enemy and breaking their spirit makes women into weapons of war. Rape becomes a tool of genetic imperialism and ethnic cleansing when impregnated women bear the enemy's children, and it has also been a mechanism of genocide, as in the cases of Bangladesh, Rwanda, Yugoslavia, and more recently, Sudan (Card, 1996; Goldstein, 2001; Sajjad, 2009).

During Bangladesh's independence movement against Pakistan in 1971, the Pakistani army adopted a strategy of rape. As a result, between 200,000 and 400,000 women were raped and made sex slaves in Pakistani military camps (Debnath, 2009; Mookherjee, 2002). After the war, the new Bangladeshi state awarded these women the title of *birangona*—war heroine—and launched various socioeconomic programs to rehabilitate them and reintegrate them into society.

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This research was conducted against a backdrop of war as gendered and the use of rape as a weapon of war serving multiple purposes. This article, more specifically, looks at the representation and implications of these issues in the media in a postwar society. It explores the discourse of the birangona of Bangladesh's independence struggle and the ways the media reflected this discourse immediately after the war. Drawing on Michel Foucault's conceptions of biopower, it attempts to understand the state's and society's exercise of power over the war heroine and her (lack of) agency as reflected in the media.

For this purpose, a critical discourse analysis has been conducted of over fifty news reports and features published in one Bengali and one English-language newspaper between December 1971 and 1972. The focus of critical discourse analysis is on "the role of discourse in the (re)production and challenge of dominance" where dominance is defined as "the exercise of power by elites, institutions or groups, that results in social inequality, including political, class, ethnic, racial and gender equality" (van Dijk as cited in Antaki, 2009, p. 434). Critical discourse analysis is a highly relevant research method for this study as it examines the use of language to establish a discourse or way of thinking about something in society—the Bangladeshi war heroine—and meanwhile reinforce existing social values, such as gender stereotypes. The outcome, as this study will conclude, is a divided or conflicting discourse in which the word or label does not seem to reflect reality, at least in terms of the media's representation.

This article refers to two types of secondary data: newspapers and oral histories. The *Bangladesh Observer* and *Dainik Bangla* were leading dailies at the time. The former, which was privately owned and catered to the country's middle- and upper-class English readership, at times raised implicit questions about the plight of the war heroine; the latter, a state-owned Bengali-language newspaper, mostly acted as a government mouthpiece. The researcher analyzes text only, as little was available in the form of images, and chose to focus on the year following the war because discussion surrounding the birangona was then at its peak. It died down soon after, especially following several bloody coups in the mid-1970s that brought successive military governments to power. Only after the advent of democracy in the 1990s was the subject of the liberation war revived. The study then compares the findings from the news reports to oral histories of the birangona compiled by various writers. The latter provide background information on the subject and show the conflicting narratives between the government-assigned label of birangona, their representation in the media, and the reality of the subjects—the women war victims—through their own personal accounts as presented in the case studies. The main source is Professor Nilima Ibrahim's *Ami Birangona Bolchhi* (I am the Birangona speaking), which upon its initial publication in 1998 was the first compilation of such oral histories since the war twenty-seven years earlier and has since become the most recognized one to date.

The study broadly examines how the postwar Bangladeshi media represented the war heroine, whether and how it aided the state in the rehabilitation of victims of wartime rape, and what the media's choices meant for the birangona. It argues that news reports on the birangona, including those in the various rehabilitation programs introduced by the state, represented the women as victims rather than heroines, prioritized their gender above all else, and rendered them invisible through the very discourse

they were the subject of.¹ In other words, the media, while reinforcing the discourse, reflected a discrepancy between the apparent glory of the *birangona* title and its application in actuality.

Contextualizing the *Birangona* Discourse

In 1947, independence from Britain and the partition of India and Pakistan left the latter geographically divided into two parts on either side of India: West Pakistan, which we now know as Pakistan; and East Pakistan, today's Bangladesh.

Despite comprising the majority population of Pakistan at the time, the Bengalis faced vigorous repressions by the Pakistanis, from denying the Bengali language national status to discrimination against Bengalis in civil and military service, and so forth. Beginning with the Language Movement in 1952, resistance against the West Pakistani authorities built up in the East. War finally broke out after West Pakistan refused to accept the results of the general elections of 1970, in which an East Pakistani, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, was elected president of Pakistan by majority vote. March 1971 marked the start of a nine-month struggle for independence, in which between 1.5 and 3 million Bengalis were killed and over 30 million left homeless (Debnath, 2009; Mookherjee, 2002).

Official and unofficial estimates claim between 200,000 and 400,000 Bengali women were raped (Debnath, 2009; Mookherjee, 2002). Non-Bengalis in East Pakistan were also reported killed and raped, but the scope of this article is restricted to Bengali rape victims during the war. Reports described the targets as mainly Hindu women, but Bengali women, irrespective of religion, caste, or class, came under attack by the West Pakistani military backed by local collaborators, who were fighting guerrilla forces called the Mukti Bahini. Women and girls from the ages of seven to seventy-five were raped, gang-raped, and either killed or taken away by the military to become sex slaves to officers and soldiers for the duration of the war. Even as the Pakistani forces surrendered in December 1971, some reportedly claimed to be leaving their "seed" behind in the women they had impregnated in the mass rape (Sharlach, 2000).

On December 22, 1971, almost immediately after victory was gained, a proclamation by the government of the newly independent state of Bangladesh declared the women who had been raped during the war "*birangona*," or war heroines. Rehabilitation centers were soon set up to provide the women with medical aid, including treatment of diseases and abortion of unwanted pregnancies. Socioeconomic support programs followed, offering the women training in income-generating activities, and a marry-off campaign was launched to encourage Bangladeshi men to come forward and marry the rape victims.

These measures, and the *birangona* label overall, were presumably intended to honor the dishonored women and help them regain acceptance in a conservative, Muslim-majority society where a

¹ In view of the tension between the representations of the *birangona* as victim, survivor, or heroine, combined with the researcher's ambivalence about them, all these terms, as well as victim/survivor and war heroine, will be used to refer to the *birangona*.

woman's worth lay in her virtue and chastity. However, as oral histories suggest and as this article will argue, this purpose seems to have been defeated, as the label served only to identify the women in question and isolate them from society. Many women declined to accept the title for fear of being stigmatized, and those who did use it earned the sympathy of some members of society but suffered the disdain of most others. Many of the women were even rejected by their own families, including their parents in the case of unmarried women, and husbands and in-laws in the case of married women. Some people even distorted the word "birangona" to pronounce it "*barangona*," meaning prostitute in Bengali (Ibrahim, 1998/2001; Mookherjee, 2002). The women were not given state honor or honored openly otherwise, and for the most part they could not live with their heads held high (Ibrahim, 2001). Honorifics notwithstanding, the Bangladeshi war heroine was rendered almost invisible in society as a source of disgrace to her family, community, and nation.

Hazy Heroism: The Birangona/Lanchhita Dialectic

Directly after the Bangladesh government's December 22, 1971, proclamation declaring the wartime rape victims "birangona," the print media published single column news pieces titled "War Heroes" in the December 23, 1971 issue of daily *Morning News* and "Birangona" in *Dainik Bangla*, and "Oppressed Women Will Be Rehabilitated" the December 24, 1971 issue of *The Bangladesh Observer*.

Examination of news stories and features published between 1971 and 1972, however, found the use of the term birangona and other words glorifying the subject to be rare. A study of *Dainik Bangla* and the *Bangladesh Observer* yielded the following findings.

Dainik Bangla

A series of news reports, features, and a few letters to the editor concerning the war heroines and their rehabilitation followed the initial declaration. In January 1972, *Dainik Bangla* ran nine such items, of which one was an editorial, one a letter, and one a four-part series. All the news reports referred to the women as *lanchhita*, which the *Bangla Academy Bengali-English Dictionary* assigns translations ranging from "disgraced, harassed, insulted, persecuted" to "stained, tarnished, spotted and soiled." Whether describing the torture they endured during the war as in the series of articles, or reporting on rehabilitation measures, the newspaper referred to the women either as *lanchhita* or as *nirjatita*, meaning "repressed," including in headlines. Only once in a feature on the women's page, once in the series, and in the headline of the letter did *Dainik Bangla* ever refer to them as birangona.

The editorial ("Lanchhita mohilader punorbashon," 1972) stressed rehabilitation as top-priority, urged married men to take back their wives, and called on unmarried men to come forward to marry rape survivors. Yet even its headline may be defined as "the rehabilitation of the disgraced women." The feature on the women's page (Shafiullah, 1972), the headline of which may be translated as "disgraced mothers and sisters and society"—referred to the government's declaration of the women as birangona and the people's responsibility to reinstate them in society. It suggested measures for the women's rehabilitation, such as training educated women to become nurses, steno-typists, and telephone

operators, and offering women with little or no education instruction in sewing, handicrafts, cooking, and home help.

The letter to the editor (Ali, 1972) described the “women who had lost everything” as deserving of reverence and a warm welcome by their families, who, the letter asserted, should guide their re-entry into normal life. The writer also stated that society should not neglect or stigmatize the women, and that those who showed them disrespect should be punished. A front-page news story (“Nirjatito meyeder opor,” 1972) covered the establishment of a “home for the disgraced and pregnant women” to free them of unwanted children and provided phone numbers for the home.

In a four-part series (Ashraf, 1972), the headline of the third part referred to the women as “*biddhosto*” (ruined, destroyed, demolished, fallen to pieces, annihilated) and “*bibhranto*” (confused, bewildered, misguided, erroneous, wrong, blundering), and described them as not knowing where their place was.

In February, March, and April of 1972, *Dainik Bangla* continued to use the terms described above to refer to the women in news reports on developments in the rehabilitation programs. These included government allotments to finance rehabilitation measures and reports on foreign visitors to Bangladesh who encouraged the women to start their lives anew. One comprehensive feature (“Bangladesh o birangona,” 1972), published on the women’s page, mentioned the birangona label but also used the term nirjatita to refer to the women. It pointed to the need to support the women not only economically but also socially and psychologically, and questioned the effectiveness of the birangona title, suggesting that society should not allow the women to be isolated by it but rather treat them as mothers and sisters, and that men should come forward and set examples for others by marrying them. A piece published in the same month, however, reported that the rehabilitation board had thanked the men who had shown interest, informed them that no dowry or benefits were offered to those willing to marry the women, and stated that at that point the birangona were not interested in marriage.

News stories published in June, July, and August focused on the inhuman torture the women had suffered during the war. The subject of one story (“Sayera khatun bichar,” 1972) had been raped and impregnated, and her child burned alive. She had wanted to kill herself but finally opted to file a case against her perpetrator. The focus was on the fact that the perpetrator was still free despite the case being filed two months previously, and questioned whether the woman would get justice. Another story described how in one rural town, several birangona who had received new clothes from aid workers were scolded, stripped naked, and beaten by women in the community who had not received clothes (“Je bole nari,” 1972) .

Throughout the rest of the year, coverage in *Dainik Bangla* focused mainly on the women war victims’ rehabilitation and slow recovery. It described the measures taken and how these women benefited—mainly by receiving training and informal employment, which kept them occupied and contributed to their emotional healing. One comprehensive feature (“Sonapur punorbashon kendro,” 1972) explored creative work women were doing at one of the rural rehabilitation centers, which helped them heal psychologically as well. It related women’s stories of being neglected by parents, husbands, and

society at large, which had led many to commit suicide, and noted that anti-liberation elements that had collaborated with the Pakistani army during the war were now poisoning the minds of fathers, brothers, and husbands against social acceptance of such women after the war. The repudiated women—those dishonored during the war as well as many who were widowed—had then come to work at this rehabilitative home. But there too, according to the report, they were on show for the public who came to see them, pretending to know them but actually viewing the women war victims as objects on display.

While there were reports on women who killed themselves or suffered physically from illegal abortions, most news stories during this time took a more positive stance. A comprehensive series on the rehabilitation centers focused on what was being done for the women and, indeed, what they themselves were doing to recuperate. The featured articles related stories of the women slowly finding themselves again, describing their various talents and their dreams of a better future.

The Bangladesh Observer

After the government's initial announcement of the title "birangona," the *Bangladesh Observer* published two news stories and one letter to the editor in December 1971. The first ("Oppressed women will," 1971) noted that "those women who were oppressed and lost their chastity at the hands of the barbarous occupation forces would be rehabilitated with full dignity and honor"; the second quoted a political leader claiming that the "cruelty and barbarity need[ed] no further elaboration." The letter called upon men to come forward to marry the "heroines, widows."

News published in January 1972 reported the formation of the rehabilitation board and the efforts to rehabilitate the "unfortunate women and children." A news item in early February told of two men—a father of a young girl and a husband—who had died upon seeing their daughter and wife raped ("Horrid tale of," 1972). A second story focused on the Pakistani army's "inhuman crime" and the "defiled and molested women," 3,000 of whom had "lost their chastity to their beastly frenzy" in one town alone. It also described the acts of an "intelligent girl" who was "kept" by an army officer and tried to "keep him in good humor," for otherwise he would kill fifty people every night ("Pak army perpetrated," 1972).

A front-page news item reported on the board formed to rehabilitate the women dishonored by the Pakistani army. Later in the month, another such item related then Prime Minister Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's fervent appeal to render the honor and dignity due to the oppressed women. He reportedly referred to them as "mothers, sisters and daughters" and exhorted the people to set inspiring examples of nobility of character by choosing "from among the distressed women their brides" ("Give due honour," 1972). On the same day, another story described how Rahman's wife, Begum Mujib, had met with the "distressed women" and assured them that the nation was proud of them and that they "would share with other women the same honour and dignity" ("I am like'," 1972).

In March 1972, the *Bangladesh Observer* ran eight news items and one letter to the editor pertaining to the issue. These referred to the women war victims as "incredibly ashamed," "oppressed," "violated women" and "dishonored girls" who needed rehabilitation. Just one piece used the title birangona. The issue was said to be a social problem that only a change in attitude could counter.

In April and May, the paper's output on the topic consisted of one article, one letter, one editorial, and a longer piece on women in the liberation war. The last item ("Woman in our," 1972) discussed war heroines—both those who had been admitted into the homes and rehabilitated, and the hundreds who committed suicide every week—suggested treatment, training, employment, and means of social integration for the survivors, and reported that prospective bridegrooms for the women were demanding benefits in exchange for marrying them. It also noted that the women were more interested in social integration than in the "flamboyant title" of *birangona*. The editorial also pointed this out, claiming that "names are quite empty left to the cult of sound alone." ("Viranganas," 1972)

On July 20, 1972, a large front-page story ("War babies leave," 1972) reported on the war babies who had been adopted by people abroad, especially in Canada. It made no reference to the mothers of the war babies.

Throughout the rest of the year, the *Bangladesh Observer* published only a few news items on the issue. These focused mainly on the rehabilitation of the women war victims/survivors, referred to as "tortured women," and detailed how some had been reunited with their families and others otherwise rehabilitated. One piece ("Mass rape in," 1972) described the situation in detail. Quoting a foreign doctor working in Bangladesh, it discussed the chronic diseases, marital distress, and social problems resulting from the rape. It put the number of women raped at 400,000 to 430,000, of whom 200,000 were said to have become pregnant. Of these, the report continued, between 150,000 and 170,000 had aborted the pregnancies before the government rehabilitation programs had begun. Many of the remaining 30,000 had committed suicide; the others either terminated the pregnancies as a part of the program or kept the babies. The article claimed that even after the program was announced, many doctors had refused to perform abortions for fear that they were illegal (as had formerly been the case in the country). It also related some personal stories, such as that of a woman whose husband, upon returning from the war and finding her pregnant as a result of rape, had thrown her out with her six children; and of a girl who was ostracized by family and friends.

Such were the news stories and features published on the *birangona*, the supposed war heroines of Bangladesh's war of independence. The picture these stories convey, however, is one of victims whose lives have ended rather than heroines honored by society and the state, as the following section will argue.

Heroine, Victim, or Illusion? Binding the *Birangona* to a Divided Discourse

Three broad factors emerge from the representation of the rape victims/survivors in newspapers in postwar Bangladesh: the portrayal of the women as victims rather than heroines; the presentation of the victims in stereotyped images of "woman" and "feminine"; and the war heroine's absence from all of it. How did the state and society, through the media, enforce this unwritten policy of rendering the *birangona* victim, woman, and invisible all at the same time?

The Birangona and Biopower

Like Louis Althusser with his notions of repressive and ideological state apparatuses, and Antonio Gramsci with his conceptions of coercive and consensual power, Michel Foucault sees a shift in the organization of power over the 18th century. Power is exercised by means of surveillance upon the individual actor through discipline. The threat of surveillance creates a tendency toward self-monitoring in the individual, ultimately leading to the creation of productive and docile bodies.

Foucault also believed that power functions through the creation and maintenance of norms, which "codify behavior, and they categorize individuals either as normal or pathological" (McLaren, 2004, p. 224). Gender norms are enforced not only by law but also by social taboos, and feminists claim that even "positive" norms, such as the association of women with virtue, care, and nonviolence, can serve to perpetuate the status quo by keeping women "in their place" (McLaren, 2004, p. 224).

Although Foucault has been criticized both for gender blindness as well as his lack of emphasis on resistance—though he did believe it existed—his theory seems to fit quite well with the subject at hand. Foucault's theories of the exercise of power through discourse can be applied to the Bangladeshi birangona "trapped in [her] own history" (Dreyfus & Rabinow, 1982, p. 210), for whom there was in fact, at least at that time, little scope for resistance, or none that was taken up during that period.

The label birangona carried certain qualifiers and expectations, and for women weighed down by social expectations and made docile subjects this resulted in a form of self-surveillance, which the media portrayals mirrored. In return for the honor that supposedly came with the title, the women were expected to participate unquestioningly in the various rehabilitation programs and move on with their lives without protest. The women's reality, as is apparent in the oral histories and to some extent in the media reports, was one of dishonor and disgrace. Yet the social discourse, combined with the social norms and values of the community, persuaded the women to act in line with the expectations of them as docile bodies—to accept what had happened to them and suffer in silence. The image of a birangona in the media was that of a woman victimized and ruined, typical and bound to typically feminine values and work, invisible and passive. Rescue and redemption were possible only if she conformed to the male-imposed mechanisms for salvaging her.

The birangona discourse was a means of exercising biopower on this large group of women. Foucault's notion of biopower, presumably as it is used to further the interests of capitalism, "emerges as an apparently benevolent but peculiarly invasive and effective form of social control" (Sawicki, 1999, p. 190) that evolves in two forms through disciplinary and regulatory power respectively. The former power is "a knowledge of and power over the individual body," aiming to make the individual body, among other things, more docile "by creating desires, attaching individuals to specific identities, and establishing norms against which individuals and their behaviors and bodies are judged and against which they police themselves" (Sawicki, 1999, p. 190). The second, regulatory power is "inscribed in policies and interventions governing the population" (Sawicki, 1999, p. 191).

Foucault applied this theory to the control of bodies for the purposes of capitalism, for example, representing the body as a machinery of reproduction, but his two forms of biopower are applicable to the *birangona* discourse as well—the first at the micro level of the individual women, and the second with regard to the overarching state policy, rehabilitation programs, etc. At the private and individual level, the discourse delineated a course for the *birangona* by imposing certain expectations on her behavior that she met by monitoring and policing herself and acting accordingly. This included remaining silent about her traumatic experiences during the war. These expectations were then further reestablished, and even institutionalized at the public and macro-level, through rehabilitation measures that subjected her body's reproductive (abortion and adoption) and productive (training and work) functions to state regulations. The *birangona*, like every other subject, was a social rather than a personal construct.

The media, for their part, contributed to the discourse by reinforcing it through their own presentation and representation of the *birangona*—which, however, reflected a divided discourse. Their reporting on the state's policy and programs essentially reproduced the state's position on the *birangona*, but it also, perhaps inadvertently, reflected the discrepancy between the meaning the title was intended to have and the effect it actually had—or did not have—in society. Overall, they portrayed *birangona* not as heroines but as victims who were essentially feminine in terms of their work, values, and qualities—silence, passivity, and invisibility.

Heroine or Victim? The Illusory Birangona

A notable feature of the newspaper coverage is the very rare use of the title *birangona* or war heroine to refer to the women who were raped during the war of independence in Bangladesh. The women are most often referred to as “oppressed,” “disgraced,” and “dishonored.” The Bengali word most often used, *lanhhita*, connotes numerous states, from disgraced, harassed, insulted, and persecuted to stained, tarnished, spotted, and soiled. In no way do these words contribute to the image of a “heroine”; they refer rather to people who have been shamed. Other words—*biddhosto*, meaning ruined or destroyed; *bibhranto*, meaning confused or bewildered; and phrases such as “women who have lost their all”—also portray a shattered image of someone who is supposed to be a heroine.

It is worth mentioning here, however, that with time the *Dainik Bangla's* reports on the women became somewhat more comprehensive. Whereas the initial stories published soon after the war referred simply to the “oppressed” women and government measures being taken to rehabilitate them, stories later in the year tended to focus more on the lives of the women themselves. These related stories of how the women were benefiting—though mainly in terms of professional training for economic purposes—from the rehabilitation measures and how, to an extent, this was helping them psychologically as well. However, the paper did not run any stories with the type of happy ending—women being accepted by their families, or reintegrated into society—that could have set a positive example for others to do the same.

War heroines' stories of courage and endurance are instead related in the oral histories compiled decades after the war. Ibrahim (1998/2001) tells the story of one *birangona*, Tara, who suffered unbearable cruelty at the hands of the Pakistani army. Though she claimed that the *birangona* title gave

her strength, after the war she had to migrate abroad, unable to start life anew in the homeland for which she had so bravely endured the sacrifice of her honor.

Such narratives reflect the inner emotions of the *birangona* and depict their courage, strength, and determination to move on with their lives. The stories could have set inspirational examples, but the media did not air them at the time, perhaps because they were not the stories of heroism that came with the label of *birangona*: Far more than the title—if it had any role at all—it was the individual strength and willpower of the women that allowed them to survive. In fact, in many instances use of the title actually served to identify the women, making it difficult rather than easy to gain acceptance in society. In the oral histories compiled by Ibrahim (2001), it seems that the only honor the women experienced was to be addressed as *birangona* by then Prime Minister and Father of the Nation Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. Other than that, the title was seldom used, and the honor and respect that were supposed to come with it were felt still less often.

The Gendered Hero(ine)

The second factor mentioned above in relation to the findings is the tendency to reinforce gender stereotypes, especially those concerning women. (Comparison of the representation of women and men is beyond the scope of this paper, which does not examine the representation of male freedom fighters, victims, or casualties of war).

The use of rape in war has been broadly ascribed to three motivations: the “booty principle,” where the enemy’s women become part of the spoils surrendered by the defeated and conquered territory; as a message of humiliation sent through women to men, reminding them of their failure to protect the former; and to promote “soldierly solidarity through male bonding” (Cockburn, 2001, p. 22). According to Kelly (2000), the targeting of women in military conflicts results from misogyny combined with the fact that women are seen as carriers of culture, and their bodies “as both territory to be conquered and vehicles through which the nation/group can be reproduced” (Kelly, 2000, p. 50). Rape in such sectarian conflicts as that in Bangladesh thus also becomes a tool of ethnic cleansing, used to either impregnate women so that they bear the “enemy’s” children, or prevent them from becoming mothers in their own communities by making them socially unacceptable or physically unable to bear children. Sharlach (2000), in her study on rape as genocide in Bangladesh, Bosnia, and Rwanda, attributes this to the signification of women as symbols of honor in their role as “mothers of the nation and transmitters of culture” in some communities that then stigmatize rape victims/survivors doubly for having brought dishonor upon both themselves and the community. The actual rape is followed by a “second rape”: the ostracism of the women from those communities and their own families, where they become pariahs.

In the context of Bangladesh, Ibrahim (1998/2001) narrates the stories of several *birangona* who, after being rescued and freed after the war, would not identify themselves. Others who contacted their families were not taken back by them and were instead left at the rehabilitation centers to fend for themselves. Despite the glory apparent in the title of the *birangona*, society was reluctant to accept, let alone glorify, the woman behind the label.

Birangona Meherjan claims to be proud of her title (Ibrahim, 1998/2001). Her family wanted to take her back, but, not wishing to burden them with social stigma, she ended up marrying the Pakistani soldier who had raped and impregnated her. Another birangona, Rina, claims to have every happiness in life except the respect due a birangona (Ibrahim, 1998/2001). She questions honoring martyrs and their families by naming streets after them and so forth when many birangona have felt forced to leave the country, so strong was the disrespect attached to them. These case studies highlight the difficulties women in Bangladesh faced when trying to move ahead in life while carrying the label of having been raped, despite the circumstances of war.

The whole idea of women having “lost their all” as a result of having been raped reinforces an already prevalent social norm—that a woman’s “all” lies in her virginity when she is unmarried, in her chastity when she is married, and in her sexual exclusivity in general. The “age-old relation between hysteria and the womb (called *hystera* in Greek)” (Shildrick & Price, 1999, p. 3), and “the image of floating or unruly wombs and their attendant symptoms of hysteria” (Price & Shildrick, 1999, p. 337) can be extended to the case of Bangladesh, where again a woman’s sexuality determines her well-being and where something like rape represents the death of her soul and her social self. Rape is unarguably a heinous crime, but magnifying its significance to this extent arguably contributes to its popularity as a weapon in times of war, endowing it with the power to subject a woman to ostracism by family and community and split apart any society, especially a conservative one. Had the media, without undermining the brutality of rape, placed less significance on sexual chastity and exclusivity in their presentation of the birangona, the social ramifications after the event might have been reduced.

The rehabilitation measures that were taken also reflect and reinforce gender stereotypes. The professions for which the women were trained, for example, were limited to nurse, stenotypist, and telephone operator for educated women and seamstress, handicrafter, cook, or home help for illiterate women—all occupations that are typically considered “women’s work.” The division of labor was perhaps even more difficult to overcome 30-odd years ago than it is now. But here again, the media may be criticized for their failure to take up the role of questioning these steps and suggesting less gender-divisive rehabilitation measures, for all they did was report them.

The “marry-off campaign” was another such measure. Men were called upon to come forward to marry the war victims/survivors. Initially, the media merely reported the announcement of this program. Later, they parroted the government’s message that dowries and benefits were not being offered to those who chose to answer the call. Finally, they simply conveyed the information that the war heroines were not keen to marry at that point in time. The media did not play any critical role in either supporting or criticizing the campaign. Neither did they present any reportage on the men who apparently came forward to marry birangona in hopes of receiving financial benefits. Finally, they ran no in-depth stories on why the women, who were in dire straits at that point, were disinclined to marriage, a state that would likely have helped them re-establish themselves in society. The media did not take on a critical role by questioning the government programs or even providing any sort of feedback on them. They simply reiterated them.

The "Absence Presence" of the War Heroine

Birangona Maina relates how, upon her return home after the war, her mother told her she should have died and never come back. Birangona Shefa's narrative describes her ordeal of having to serve a different man or men every night in the Pakistani army camps, being left naked without food or water, and being moved from camp to camp every few weeks. She points out that the local collaborator who handed her over to the Pakistani military now claims to be a freedom fighter and is serving as a judge (Ibrahim, 1998/2001).

An intriguing feature of the birangona-related news items in 1971 and 1972 is the invisibility of the birangona herself. Mookherjee (2002) argues that despite the abortion and adoption options provided for pregnant birangona, they were unable to exercise their own agency. In the media too, the birangona herself was largely invisible. Most of the stories related very basic statistics on the birangona, or on what was being done for them. Few were about the women themselves, and none carried their voices. Readers got little, if any, insight into what the birangona was thinking and experiencing, what her own needs and desires were. Birangona Fatema graduated from university after the war but could not get a job as a schoolteacher, since "a characterless woman could not be set up as a role model for the schoolgirls" (Ibrahim, 1998/2001, p. 110). But such stories did not make the news, and despite being at the center of the discourse the birangona was absent from it, as if she were best kept hidden.

The same can be said of the abortion and adoption programs. As far as can be understood from the media coverage, the women were never asked whether they wanted to participate in these programs. The media did not question whether all the women wanted to be rid of their war babies. Ibrahim (1998/2001) cites the story of one birangona who wanted to send her child abroad, wishing the child to have a good life abroad and not wanting the child's "polluted" blood in Bangladesh. But in terms of media coverage, the mothers of the war babies were invisible. Even when several war babies were sent abroad for adoption, their mothers were completely absent from the picture, so strong was the need to dissociate the women from their half-Pakistani offspring. The media reinforced the state policy of removing infants from their mothers and purging the country of war babies.

Had the newspapers instead run in-depth interviews and stories, the birangona could have expressed their views on, for example, rehabilitation measures that would benefit them, the treatment of war babies, and the bringing of perpetrators to account. The media could also have provided coverage of the success or efficacy of the rehabilitation programs or followed up on the lives of the affected women.

The media also forwent their important role as the platform on which the women could identify perpetrators and seek justice for the crimes committed against them. The news reports related to the birangona did not mention the perpetrators at all, let alone channel the women's demands for justice. Immediately after independence—as well as decades later, when the war criminals are yet to be tried—reports of this type, had they existed, could have been a valuable source of documented information. But most of all, they would have been an effective way for the women to exercise agency by having their voices heard.

While Kelly (2000) argues that women subjected to wartime rape may be exercising agency in choosing to remain silent, it is debatable whether the silence of the *birangona* was an act of agency or compulsion. Saikia (2007) holds that in the case of Bangladesh, silence was a state policy—an instrument for the agency of the state and not the women. She notes the *birangona*'s absence from government reports and documents and even in the media, apart from reports on rehabilitation programs and claims that the subject was rendered "unthinkable" and "unspeakable" even among the women themselves due to the lack of support groups, counseling services, and rape crisis centers after Bangladesh's bloody liberation war. Saikia terms this a "politics of active national forgetting" that "exposed a deep social and cultural misogyny, evidence that the male-controlled state could not interact with the survivors of rape as human selves but had to hide, disperse, and dismember their memory and speech to regain manly honor" (Saikia, 2007, p. 75). In this way too, then, gender stereotypes were reinforced, with the passive and dishonored woman serving invisibly to re-establish the honor, dignity, and power of men and, more broadly, that of the state. Mookherjee too refers to this "absence presence" of the *birangona* in the "invocation of the raped woman in the national project, memorialisation of history and documentation of a gendered oral history of rape" (Mookherjee, 2002, p. 33), suggesting that the *birangona*, though the subject of the discourse, is absent from her own history.

There may yet be hope for the future, however. According to Foucault, discourses transmit, produce, and reinforce power but also undermine, weaken, and help thwart it (Caldwell, 2007). Power's ubiquitous flow through multiple sources also provides scope for the creation of multiple subject positions, alternative subject discourses, and resistance (Caldwell, 2007). Caldwell cites McNay's example of the symbolic inscription of sexual or gendered self-images that can be countered "with a refusal to embrace the disembodiment of the self" (Caldwell, 2007, p. 777).

Given the recent uptick in demands that Pakistan apologize for the atrocities committed, and the ongoing trial of war criminals in Bangladesh, the traditional role of the *birangona* too can be challenged.² She can exercise agency by coming forward with her story and becoming a valuable witness in testifying against the perpetrators of war crimes and crimes against humanity. She can set an example for others like her in the fight to gain social acceptance. By talking about her experiences, she can encourage others to do the same for their own psychological healing. In short, the *birangona* can resist the chains of the discourse that compelled her to silently accept and live with her traumatic experiences in the name of a glorified label that has brought her little glory.

Concluding Thoughts

This article has attempted to portray the gendered nature of war, where the rape of women is used as a weapon against the enemy, serving multiple purposes and having effects that persist long after the actual battle is over. Through an examination of media content and a presentation of oral histories, it has argued that the ravages of wartime rape have not been effectively addressed, and that the discourse

² The Awami League government, voted into power in early 2009, is in the process of fulfilling its pledge to try the war criminals. Pakistan, however, has rejected Bangladesh's demand that it apologize for the atrocities committed during the war.

surrounding the birangona in postwar Bangladeshi society has disempowered the war heroines. The title birangona inscribed certain values and expectations upon the women, as was apparent in the media's representation of them as victims, and in the fact that both their victimhood and their salvation were based on their identity as women. In addition, social stigma led to a culture of silence around the issue of wartime rape, forcing these women to remain in the shadows and depriving them of agency and access to legal justice, social justice, and personal healing.

This silence continued for almost two decades after 1971. The issue did not come up again until the 1990s, with the establishment of the Gano Adalat or People's Tribunal, a mock trial of local collaborators in which some of the war-affected related the experiences they had during the war.³ This was a largely ineffective move that, contrary to intent, negatively impacted the lives of women who came forward with their stories, for now they were clearly identified as rape victims and as such openly scorned in society, especially in their local villages. As Mookherjee put it (2002), by that point the main crime had become not the rape itself but the women's disclosure of it. By telling their stories, the women not only brought dishonor upon their families and villages but also created scope for implicating local collaborators in the crimes. Mookherjee (2006) sees socioeconomic status and the phenomenon of public secrecy as contributing to the silence on the sexual violence committed in 1971, which, Debnath quotes Bina D'Costa as saying, compelled women to suppress their stories and "resort to a 'negotiated survival' in order to avoid further persecution" (cited in Debnath, 2009, p. 53).

A significant reason behind the failure to try the war criminals of Bangladesh's independence movement—despite rape being internationally recognized as a war crime—is that women have not been able to come forward to identify their perpetrators and demand their punishment. It may even be argued that in the long run this has created a culture of impunity in the nation, which some say has spilled over to the rape of women from indigenous communities in the Chittagong Hill Tracts.⁴ Freeing the birangona of the shame and stigma associated with her experience of rape could have contributed to her psychological healing, her social standing, and her cause for justice.

Despite the honor associated with the birangona label, many women's reluctance to identify themselves as war heroines attests to the fact that the simple title did not deliver all that it promised. Debatably, Bangladeshi society was not ready to accept and honor raped women as national heroines. Perhaps instead of singling them out to publicly acknowledge that while others fought the war with

³ In March 1992, thousands of people, including writers, academics, cultural activists, and students, joined the Ghatik Dalal Nirmul Jatiya Samannaya Committee (Committee for the Elimination of the Killers and Collaborators of 1971) led by writer Jahanara Imam, and staged a Gano Adalat or People's Court in Dhaka. The mock court tried, convicted, and sentenced war criminals to death, urging the government to bring them to account. The sentences were never carried out, however, and the issue of the trial of war criminals has regained momentum only in recent years. Leading members of the committee were charged with sedition at the time, but these charges were later dropped.

⁴ Amidst social tension and violent conflict among indigenous communities and Bengali settlers in the Chittagong Hill Tracts since the mid 1980s, hundreds of women have allegedly been subjected to rape. Exact official figures are unavailable, however.

weapons, the birangona fought it with her body, survivors of wartime rape could have been labeled "freedom fighters" as were the former.

The above research is limited to a critical discourse analysis of relevant content in two newspapers published immediately after the war. A broader, more comprehensive study of the subject could rely on examination of more media forms, such as film and documentary, combined with the social discourse at the time and its evolution, if any, over the decades. Further analytical research on the subject may add to the discourse and help reform the image of the birangona, eventually contributing to the social and psychological healing of personal wounds and a war-ravaged national psyche alike.

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