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**The Politics of Narration: Revisiting the Violence and Trauma of Bangladesh ‘Liberation**

**War’ Through Shaheen Akthar’s *The Search***

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**Abstract:** This paper interrogates Shaheen Akthar’s treatment of *birangonas* (women victims of rape) in her novel, *The Search*, by interrogating the underlying politics in her *re*-presentation of pain, suffering and the psychological trauma of loss of people from minority groups in the former East Pakistan. It investigates the author’s circumvention of the underlying nuances of the Bangladesh Liberation War allowing for the implicit furthering of the nationalist discourse based on the ‘Othering’ of women of minority groups; and, contrary to her outward claim of addressing the issue of ‘*birangonas*’ in the novel, this paper investigates her perpetuation of stereotypes already prevalent about rape victims of war in Bangladesh. Therefore, *The Search*, this paper argues, objectifies and stereotypes Bengali women, implicitly vilifies a particular religion and the non-Bengali minorities by evoking and emphasizing the religious identity markers of its evil characters, marginalizes them by placing ethnic Bengalis at the centre stage, and based on a false dichotomy of innocent, liberal Bengalis versus evil others, the author reduces a major and complex historical event to a coloniser/ colonised binary.

**Key Words:** Psychological trauma, Bangladesh, Liberation War, Birangona, East-Pakistan

... literature has a potential to deal with trauma in a way that does justice to the particularity of different kinds of traumatic experiences, from the loss of a loved one to living through collective catastrophe like genocide or a natural disaster, without forcing them in one category. If a key challenge of trauma theory is to avoid false universalism, literature has the advantage of drawing our attention to

the unique nature of each traumatic experience and its social and cultural contexts.

(Davis & Meretoja, 2020, p. 06)

### **Historical Background**

The War of 1971, known as ‘Liberation war’ in Bangladesh, or the ‘Bangladesh war of Independence’, started off as a civil war in the former East Pakistan<sup>i</sup> and ended up as an interstate war between India and Pakistan. Although there had been many underlying and unaddressed socio-economic disparities responsible for the war, the immediate cause which precipitated the bloodshed was the political deadlock between the ruling East and the ruled West Pakistan caused by the cancellation of the general elections conducted in December 1970. The elections were being held for the first time in decades of military rule across 300 constituencies of Pakistan, of which 162 seats were in the eastern wing and 138 in the western province of the country. The election results emerged out astoundingly polarized in which the east-based Awami League party (AL) under the leadership of Sheikh Mujibur Rehman won with an absolute majority of 160 out of 162 seats, all from the East Pakistan. Similarly, the West-based Pakistan People’s Party (PPP) under the chairmanship of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto emerged as a second major party which won 81 of 138 seats, all from the West. The election had clearly shown that both the winning parties had no appeal outside of their respective regions at a national level. Bhutto was recklessly determined to protest against the convening of the National Assembly and government formation without having PPP onboard, which he claimed was “the sole representative of the people of West Pakistan” (Raghavan, 2013 p. 37). Therefore, despite having won the elections with an absolute majority, as required to form the government, it was made clear to AL that a negotiated agreement with Bhutto was essential for the formation of government at the centre. The attempts to work through this political aporia continued for months in which continuous meetings were held between PPP, AL and the Pakistani president, General Agha Mohammad Yahya Khan; dates for the convening of General Assembly were announced and delayed multiple times until the military crackdown of 25

March 1971 which marks the beginning of a civil war between the Pakistani military regime and the people of East-Pakistan led by the Awami League.

The war had kickstarted with the infamous ‘Operation Searchlight’ on 25<sup>th</sup> of March 1971, and lasted for nine months ending only with direct military intervention from India on 16 December 1971 when Pakistani military was defeated, and Bangladesh emerged as an independent state. However, throughout those nine months East Pakistan saw the largest migration of millions of its people, thousands of killings and rapes (Sisson & Rose, 1990, p. 152-153). Due to lack of proper records and the scarcity of impartial research available on the event, the disagreements among historians and scholars continue to remain about the nature of killings, exact number of people killed, number of rapes committed by all sections throughout the nine months of war. The oft-cited ‘official’ historical records of Bangladesh proclaim that the Pakistan army or ‘Khan Sena’—as they were contemptuously referred to, had killed “three million” Bengali people and dishonoured somewhere between “200000-400000” women in 1971 (Brownmiller, 1975, p. 81). This narrative, according to some sources, is said to have originated from Sheikh Mujib’s address to his people on 10 Jan 1972 at his release from Pakistani prison and was pushed further by India (Chowdhury, 1996 p. 06). Subsequently, it got entrenched in the South Asian and Western academia without the citation of proper sources (Sisson and Rose, 1990; Bose, 2011; Tripathi, 2014).

Salil Tripathi, an acclaimed author and editor, quotes Seraj-ur-Rahman, former deputy head of BBC Bengali Service, stating that by “three million” Mujib might have actually meant 300,000 casualties. He quotes a British journalist David Bergman, the main reporter of the ground-breaking film, *War Crimes File* writing about the report of the investigating committee established by Bangladesh to conduct the inquiry into the killings saying, “It has been suggested that this [the report not being made public] was because the details of only 57,000 people could be identified” (qtd. in Tripathi, pp. 313-314). Pakistan, while rejecting these claims as “exaggerated” and “baseless,” formed an inquiry commission headed by Justice Hamoodur Rahman in December

1971 to investigate the causes which had led to its defeat and division (Bose, 2011, p. 176). The commission in its report (which was not made public) presented the total number of casualties as 26000, which included the West Pakistani civilians also. This report was outrightly rejected by Bangladesh as unreasonable. Whereas different historians and scholars have come out with different numbers, Sarmila Bose, an Indian-American journalist and writer, in her controversial book *Dead Reckoning* argues that the total number of killings ranges somewhere between 50,000-100,000 including people from all groups—ethnic Bengalis, Urdu-speaking Bihari migrants, West Pakistanis, Hindus and so on (Bose, 2011, p. 181).

There exist numerous different historical and literary accounts of the Bangladesh War of 1971 and the violence and trauma associated with it, each claiming to be more objective and truthful. However, contrary to how most of the Bangladeshi literature projects *birangonas*<sup>ii</sup> and *muktijoddhas*<sup>iii</sup>, the latest ethnographic research in the area suggest otherwise. Nayanika Mookherjee who has worked extensively on the survival accounts of rape victims of Bangladesh war in the preface to her book *The Spectral Wound* lambasts how the stereotypical image of *birangonas* as homeless prostitutes was made prevalent in media and literature by generalization and misrepresentation of actual conditions they were living in (Mookherjee, 2016, pp. xviii-xix, 35). Another writer and pioneer researcher in the field, Yasmin Saikia, who has authored a seminal book on Women and War of 1971 has charged Bangladeshi nationalist historiography of being selective in its approach in recording the violence, trauma, and dehumanization of people, especially women of minority groups in Bangladesh. According to her, “Interrogating the restricted site of history made in the halls of power is the first step to clear a vacant place for the forgotten memories of survivors and examine the limitations of the national history and official memory project” (Saikia, 2011, p. 09). She turns to the women survivors of rape who were present in East Bengal in 1971 and records their testimonies against the sweeping generalizations of national history/memory project.

*The Search* (2011), an English translation of a Bengali novel *Talaash* by Shaheen Akhtar, is considered one of the foremost novels written on Bangladesh war of 1971, particularly about *birangonas* and their post-independence disillusionment. It is divided into two parts with part one apparently delineating the rape, torture and killings carried out by the ‘invader’ Pakistani army in former East-Pakistan; and in part two it engages mostly with the trauma and suffering of rape survivors and their arduous travails in independent Bangladesh. Evidently the novel attempts to delineate how Pakistani military exchanged Bengali women as war trophies by inscribing the victories/defeats/reprisals on their bodies through rape, and how subsequently Bangladesh as an independent nation-state failed to recognise their contribution, and instead disowned and subjected them to further atrocities. Whereas *The Search* is a pioneering work in many aspects, particularly in showing how the state appropriated the trauma of rape survivors and employed it in its nation-building project, it simultaneously dwells on some measured exclusions and generalizations about various non-Bengali identity groups who were part of the population of East Pakistan. Therefore, in order to critically analyse the text as an act of “remediation” which essentially creates a “postmemory” as a symbolic capital to be used by people who have no direct experience of the event of 1971, I employ the conceptual framework of Trauma Theory and Memory Studies to examine how literature informs the collective memories, reproduces past events and shapes the identity of people (Hirsch, 2012 p. 05).

In *The Search*, Mukti is an interviewer who questions, among other survivors, Mariam, a central character and a *birangona*, about her wartime experience twenty-eight years after 1971 in what is now an independent Bangladesh. Mukti, we are told, was born on the Independence Day of Bangladesh, hence inherits no direct experience of the alleged rape and atrocities that her predecessors (Mariam) had lived through while ‘liberating’ Bangladesh. She revisits this momentous event by conducting interviews of sexual victims like Mariam who narrate about the ravages of 1971 war and the brutalities that ‘Pakistani military’ had allegedly committed in the

erstwhile East Pakistan. As the novel proceeds, there unravels a pattern of binaries of good and evil; where, in the former category are placed the Bengalis, and in the latter category the West Pakistanis and Razakars<sup>iv</sup> (Akthar, 2011, p. 160). There are certain characteristics ascribed to these groups throughout the novel. The Pakistani soldiers are described as drunkards, barbarians and ‘monsters’ of sorts who cannot differentiate between humans and animals, between living and dead, men and women; they kill, rape, maim ‘Bengali’ people without even sparing the loyalist ‘Razakars’ and their women (Akthar, 198). In the same category are placed the Razakars, a group of collaborators mostly comprised of the Urdu-speaking migrant Bihari people who are often referred to by their religious identity markers; for instance, the vile character who is portrayed as a Razakar in this novel and is alleged to have supplied ‘beautiful Bengali women’ to Pakistani army for sexual pleasure during wartime is named as ‘*Haji* Sahib’ [italics added] (213). *Haji* is an honorific entitlement granted to a Muslim man or woman who performs the obligatory pilgrimage to Mecca. Now, the act of naming a vile character after such title implicitly demonizes the performing of Hajj itself. Compared to this category, the ethnic Bengali rebels known as ‘Muktijoudhas’ are generally portrayed as ‘innocent’, ‘young’ people, most of them ‘college-students’ who are compelled to take arms training in India and enter guerrilla warfare to ‘liberate’ their women and country from the ‘occupier’ and avenge the rapes and killings of their fellow countrymen. For example, the character of Master Hares in this novel, and Sohail Hoque and Maya Hoque in *A Golden Age*, a novel on the Bangladesh war of 1971 by Tahmima Anam, are presented as educated individuals who share their learned opinions on literature, politics and culture, and simultaneously take on the role of freedom fighters.

### **Testimony Literature**

“...Our era can precisely be defined as the age of testimony,” write Felman and Laub. According to them, “... testimony is provided, and is called for, when the facts upon which justice must pronounce its verdict are not clear, when the historical accuracy is in doubt and when both the truth and its supporting elements of evidence are called into question” (Felman and Laub, 1992, p.

06). This is an important reason that makes literature an invaluable vantage point which bears witness to the gruesome massacres, mass rapes, genocides of people across the globe, for example, the Holocaust, the Vietnam war, the Bosnian war etc. Keeping in view the controversy surrounding the history of ‘Liberation War’ of 1971 in Bangladesh, a question arises: does *The Search* ‘testify’ to the ‘mass-killings’ and atrocities that were carried out in East Pakistan in 1971? Does it provide its readers an objective and inconclusive account of the event/s without subscribing to or enforcing any communal or racial images and stereotypes? Before going on into exploring that in detail, I would like to quote Felman and Laub once again as pioneers of Testimony Literature on the nature of testimony. According to them, “Testimony does not offer... a completed statement, a totalizable account of ... events [sic]. In the testimony, language is in process and in trial, it does not possess itself as a conclusion, as the constation of the verdict or the self-transparency of knowledge (Felman and Laub, 1992, p. 05).

*The Search* is considered a foremost literary text that charts the harrowing accounts of atrocities committed upon women in pre- and post-1971 Bangladesh. It is significant apparently because it breaks the ominous silence on a sensitive and uneasy topic of rape of Bengali women committed in 1971, and shows how Bangladesh, for which these women sacrificed their honour, treated them with scorn as *Khota* (fallen women) after gaining independence. Evidently, in that respect this novel is a significant effort until one reads it closely and realizes how it actually does not simply testify or formulate a statement about the atrocities of 1971, which is open to a reader’s interpretation as testimonial literature according to Felman and Laub should, rather it propagates a certain discourse and, in the process, becomes a nationalist, uni-dimensional political commentary on an important historical event in the South Asian history. As mentioned above, Testimonial literature is crucial to our understanding of history especially when the accuracy of historiography is in doubt, but here *The Search* inversely reinforces the already prevalent racial/communal stereotypes about Bengalis, Biharis, Punjabis etc. Akhtar not only performs a deep racial discrimination by writing selectively about the rape victims, but also perpetuates/strengthens the

false image of *birangonas* as women with loose moral character. For instance, the incident of Bokul, a *birangona* who is invited by a social worker to her house at her son's birthday party. After the party is over Bokul expresses her desire to stay with the family. The generous host, a social worker, keeps her as a maidservant. They, including the social worker's husband, treat her like a daughter. But one day Bokul is found pregnant. When forced to reveal the impregnator she names the master of the house only to be later forced to accuse a driver instead who is immediately dismissed (Akhtar, 2011, p. 197). Incidents like these cast aspersions on the character of *birangonas* and reinforce their image as promiscuous women (Saikia, 2011). There are numerous other instances where the narrator simultaneously objectifies the Bengali women as 'beautiful' and reduces the West Pakistani/Bihari women as 'rugged' and ugly by perpetuating the stereotypes prevalent in Bangladesh about them. The Bengali women are praised for their 'enchanted eyes and black tresses' which a reader is told entices the Pakistani men towards them because the women of West are 'rugged' and hence rejected (Akhtar, pp. 150,197). At many other places the novel raises unnecessary sexist and territorial comparisons between the body of a *birangona* and the nation state. For instance, when the narrator talks about Mariam, the lead character of the novel: "this woman's life was a failure like the liberation of Bangladesh," she conspicuously objectifies a female body (Akhtar, 2011, p. 337).

The character of Mariam instigates some important questions about *birangonas*. She is ousted from her village and sent away from her community when she is found to have transgressed the moral code of her society by walking into a cinema, holding hands of a stranger boy, Jashimul Haque. After this incident she is shifted temporarily from her village Fultali to Dhaka city by her parents so that people forget about the incident and the bad reputation it entails on Mariam and her family. Sometime after she settles in Dhaka, the military crackdown begins. Mariam gets into an affair with a university student, Abed Jahangir. She sends Montu, her younger brother, back to the village and stays behind alone despite knowing all the imminent dangers there. Meanwhile she gets involved in a physical relationship with Abed Jahangir, her lover, which results in her



pregnancy. As the conflict intensifies, she is abandoned by Abed at a moment when she desperately needs him. On the night of March 25, when the Military crackdown in the name of Operation Searchlight begins in Dhaka, Mariam smeared in blood and slush writhes in pain after miscarriage. That night she is taken care of by Rameez Sheikh, a fugitive who has allegedly murdered his wife, escaped from a prison and stays at the known collaborator, Haji Sahab's house. As the novel proceeds, we are told that Mariam with other women have been captured and taken into sexual slavery by the Pakistani army. Out of all the rapists she remembers Major Ishtiyah, a 'Pakistani' soldier with whom she has sort of fallen in love with. Thereafter Mariam continues to live in a rehabilitation centre though in an independent Bangladesh now. After few months in a free country her family comes to know about her rape and pregnancy. They become worried about the social disreputation their birangona daughter will bring upon them. They bring her out of the rehabilitation centre stealthily and arrange her marriage hastily with her specially-abled cousin, Sajju. Mariam does not consent to this proposal and escapes from her uncle's house where her parents have been staying. Instead, she marries a sex-worker named Momtaj who promises her a better life together. But shortly after their marriage Momtaj starts abusing and assaulting her. She breaks from the marriage and returns back to her parents. Mariam and her mother travel to Dhaka where they live by selling off the gold ornaments of her mother at Rayerbazar house. They earn by running a sewing project for a while and continue living by that after the gold reserves are spent. One day when Mariam feels tired of her bland life, the routine of sewing business, she pushes away the sewing machine, tears its threads, and visits the Boys hostel in Dhaka University where she meets Suman, her previous boyfriend's roommate. There, in a brief scuffle, Suman calls her "trash left behind by the army" (Akhtar, 2011, p. 282). She leaves the hostel disappointed realizing that men are same everywhere. After this she again allows Suman's friend Abed Sameer into her house and makes love with him until one day, he feels afraid of her mad fits and abandons her. After experiencing so much desertion from men of all kinds Mariam repeatedly falls into the same trap when she lets Abed Jahangir (now a pseudo freedom fighter) again into her house,

despite having been abandoned by him earlier at a crucial moment when she was pregnant with his child. He leaves her again this time promising to find her a job somewhere. After getting an underpaid job she is victimised now by her aged employer who asks her to stay late in his office to give him sexual favours. Meanwhile she comes in contact with a homosexual Hindu man, Debashish. Debashish finds his way easily into Mariam's house and stays with her. His presence in the house raises concern among the neighbours and there follows an uproar, Debashish is forcefully converted and married to Mariam by the Haji Sahib's son. They continue to live in the house until one day Debashish escapes with a young boy leaving Mariam a note.

Whereas it is understandable that Akhtar wants to depict the abuse that Mariam and other *birangonas* were subjected to during and after 1971, she inadvertently stereotypes and reinforces the negative preconceptions and objectifications that had been already prevalent in Bangladeshi society about the sexual promiscuity of *birangonas*. Most of the novel engages with Mariam's quest for a husband implying that a man is essential to restore happiness and stability in a woman's life. When Mariam pushes aside her sewing machine, tears its threads, throws down a pile of plates, the narrator implicitly describes it as a sexual frustration, "[b]esides the stomach there were other organs. And a human being was not only a body. To be hunched over a machine the whole day was a waste of life (Akhtar, 2011, p. 277)." The novelist repeats the same old representation of *birangonas* as 'abnormal', 'promiscuous', and 'polluted' women desperately wanting sex. Nayanika Mookherjee whom I have quoted above raises similar questions about the totalising representation of *birangonas* in Bangladeshi media and literature. In order to exemplify she cites Naibudin Ahmad's "hair photograph" which became a sensational, overarching, representational picture giving all the faceless victims an abnormal face across media and literature:

Just as the image in the hair photograph gives an idea of the birangona as an '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 (Mookherjee xix).

Throughout *The Search*, the character of Mariam and other birnagonas imply their abnormality and their obsession with men/husbands. Whereas in the survival accounts of rape victims given by Nayanika Mookherjee and Yasmin Saikia we find that although in poverty these women continue to live with their families and children, but the fantastic narratives about them being all shunned by their families and their escape into prostitution continue to pervade the popular national memory which Akhtar has explicitly sustained in her novel also.

Testimonial literature has a potential to revisit and recreate the site of historical trauma without delivering any judgement about the right or wrong. As Felman and Laub write, "...the texts that testify do not simply report facts, but in different ways encounter and make us encounter—strangeness..." (Felman & Laub, 1992, p. 07). Shaheen Akhtar simply describes her version of things, at most she selectively talks about atrocities of Bengali women before and after 1971, she does not engage with the women of all the groups who suffered, nor does she make us—readers, 'encounter the strangeness'. It leaves little room either for the historical particularities or the reader's interpretation or misinterpretation of the perpetrator and the victim, instead her novel draws blatantly on the nationalist history which defeats its testimonial purpose.

The other important aspect of *The Search* which undermines its credibility as a literary testimony is that its narrator silences over the suffering of tens of thousands of migrant Bihari women who had also been subjected to rape and inhuman atrocities during the 1971 Bangladesh war by their fellow ethnic Bengali men. They had experienced, if not graver, at least equal horrible atrocities like their fellow Bengali womenfolk during the same period. They were brutally subjected to rape; their breasts were chopped off with Da's and their kith and kin were murdered in the reprisal killings carried out in free Bangladesh. Yasmin Saikia mentions about the death by starvation of Zaibunisa's two daughters, one three-year old and other six-month old, inside a jail in 'liberated Bangladesh' (Saikia, 2011). But Akhtar does not engage these minority women in her

novel except a one fleeting reference in the entire 359 pages<sup>7</sup> to a Bihari woman, Nasim Banu, who works as a prostitute in Tanbazar area after having been gang-raped by Bengali men (Akthar, 2011, p. 304).

In contrast to the absence of Bihari women Akthar's novel builds on the characters of many Hindu Bengali women who along with Mariam are subjected to physical assaults and rapes by the Pakistan army. These women are webbed together as one with Muslim Bengali women, they are united against the common perpetrator—Pakistan military. *The Search* does not talk about the animosity or incidents of rape widespread among the two groups. For example, the account of rape of a Hindu girl by three ethnic Muslim Bengali youths described in *The Spectral Wound* (Mookherjee, 2016) and other numerous such incidents described by Saikia. Akthar has avoided engaging with such nuances of 1971 war in her novel as they run counter to the romantic nationalist narratives of amity between Bengali Hindus and Muslims, and defeat the popular discourse of good Bengalis versus evil Pakistanis. It is common knowledge in Bangladesh that even Sheikh Mujib's government didn't remove the Enemy Property Act under which ethnic Bengalis appropriated the property of minority communities especially Hindus who had fled to India (Mookherjee, 2016).

## CONCLUSION

Based on the critical analysis of this novel vis-à-vis the historical records of an event that it deals with, under the framework of the trauma studies and testimonial literature, this paper concludes that the author perpetuates the prevalent male stereotypes and sexual objectifications about the Bangladeshi women rape victims of the 1971 war. Instead of interrogating and unsettling these stereotypes she has repeatedly drawn on the popular Bengali imagination of West Pakistani military as monsters, their women evil and rugged like its arid land, the Bihari men as Razakars and fifth columnists who supplied women to the rape camps, the 'beautiful' ethnic Bengali women with 'enchanted' eyes as victims, and ethnic Bengali men as *muktijoddhas* and 'saviours' of the land and their women. The author revisits an originary event in the history of Bangladesh and

remediates it under the present socio-political circumstances in order to form an ideal, homogenous national identity of Bangladeshi people. Whereas the novel visibilizes the violence and trauma of certain sections of people to emphasize their Bengali identity, it does so by the process of othering and silencing of the trauma of minorities in Bangladesh. Therefore, in order to bring everlasting peace and reconciliation among the divided communities, this research suggests the incorporation of ‘micro-narratives’ and varied truths to form a plural and fair representation of all the sections in Bangladeshi society.

## End Notes

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<sup>i</sup> East-Pakistan, East Bengal, or Bangladesh have been used interchangeably throughout this paper.

<sup>ii</sup> War heroines, the term was first conferred by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, first president of Bangladesh, to recognise and honour the sacrifices and contribution of the women rape victims of the 1971 war.

<sup>iii</sup> Local freedom fighters who took armed training in India and waged a guerrilla warfare against the Pakistan army.

<sup>iv</sup> Collaborators: Pro-Pakistan people of Bengal who strived for the unification of Pakistan, and supported its military in quelling the rebellion of separatist Bengalis.

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