

INTRODUCTION

“The Looking-Glass Border”

There never had been a moment in the four thousand year old history of that map when the places we know as Dhaka and Calcutta were more closely bound to each other after they had drawn their lines—so closely that I, in Calcutta, had only to look into the mirror to be in Dhaka; a moment when each city was the inverted image of the other, locked into an irreversible symmetry by the line that was to set us free—our looking-glass border. —AMITAV GHOSH 1988, 233

Bangladesh is a country symbolized by its lack and excess. A prevalent stereotype of Bangladesh in India and in the West is that it is an “Islamic” country ruled by military governments and dominated by NGOs. Alongside the prevailing international image of grinding poverty, floods, and cyclones, studies have often linked Bangladesh to policies of population control, development, outsourced garment production, and now climate change. In 1972, reflecting on the bizarre donation of a shipment of used ski clothing sent by well-meaning residents of a Scandinavian country as part of the relief efforts after the 1971 war, a Bangladeshi relief worker in Dhaka rightly said, “I guess that for many people Bangladesh is a place of shadow geography—one of those countries you think is in the Himalayas but on the other hand might be Thailand’s neighbor to the south” (Ellis 1972, 298).

Prior to 1947, the Hindu Bengalis constituted the dominant landowners in East Bengal, while Muslim Bengalis primarily worked as *munshis* (accountants) and landless peasants. After the formation of East Pakistan on the basis of religious identity, many Hindus moved to West Bengal in India and Muslim Bengalis to East Pakistan. Over the years, numerous Hindu Bengalis have also moved from Bangladesh to West Bengal as “refugees”; they have many stories about losing property. The attachment and distance between the two Bengals are aptly captured in Amitav Ghosh’s “looking-glass border”—each place became an inverted image of the other. The writings of the Bangladeshi feminist writer Taslima Nasreen contributed to this image and further strengthened already existing negative stereotypes in West Bengal and India about the “Muslims” of Bangladesh. In 1993 she published *Lojja* (Shame), portraying the backlash of the majority Muslim population against minority Hindu communities in Bangladesh. This was in response to the right-wing Indian Hindu communalists’ demolition of Babri Masjid at Ayodhya on December 6, 1992, and the subsequent massacre of minority Muslim communities in Mumbai in India.

In conjunction with this idea of lack, Indian Bengalis contradictorily identify Bangladesh as a place of excess—of hospitality, warmth, beautiful *jam-dani* saris, and “good food” (especially of varieties of river fish, particularly the favorite Bengali fish, *hilsa/ilish*, delicious kebabs, and *biriyanis*). The shadowy lines between Bangladesh and West Bengal (India) not only separated the countries but created “a yet undiscovered irony” (Amitav Ghosh 1988, 233) highlighted by the paradoxical, yet inarticulable, undiscovered relationship of intimacy and distance, lack and excess between the two divided Bengals. Doing this research in Bangladesh as an Indian Bengali from Calcutta, West Bengal (the Indian part of Bengal), I often thought of Ghosh’s “looking-glass border”: this work made me relearn our own cross-border histories.

Crossing Borders

This research was triggered in 1992 by my outrage and despair as an undergraduate student in Calcutta, India, over the unfolding of intercommunal violence after the demolition of Babri Masjid, by Hindu communalists. Being confined at home during the imposition of curfew and depending on Door-darshan (the government TV channel) for news, I became aware of the power of political rumors as I heard of widespread instances of sexual violence in Gujarat during 1992, that of Hindu men raping Muslim women and Muslim men raping Hindu women (Agarwal 1995). These circulating accounts spoke

to me of how a woman's body becomes the territory on which men inscribe their political programs, a point that the violence against Muslims in Gujarat in 2002 reconfirmed.¹ Also, news throughout the 1990s of the Japanese comfort women, the rapes in Bosnia and Rwanda, and the United Nation's declaration of rape as a war crime in the 1995 Beijing session—all these feminist concerns triggered and informed my research in Bangladesh.

In the first year of my doctoral work, I heard from a Bangladeshi student in London how women in Bangladesh were publicly talking about their experience of wartime rape. Drawing on various feminist theorizations of wartime rape (Brownmiller 1975, 1994; Stiglmayer 1994), I assumed that there would be silence about this issue at the Bangladeshi national level. I decided to visit Bangladesh for the first time in March 1997 to coincide with its twenty-fifth anniversary of the liberation war as part of a pre-fieldwork trip. On a warm, sunny morning, I landed in the smart Zia International Airport, named after one of the nation's *muktijoddhas* (liberation fighters), later the military president, Ziaur Rehman (1975–81), carrying a photograph of my host. Murals of the war could even be seen from the plane. Soon I found myself being driven through the streets of Dhaka to the upmarket diplomatic residential enclave of Bonani. On the way, I watched with curiosity and amusement as colorfully painted rickshaws, “baby-taxis,” and expensive foreign cars vied for road space. The stretch from the airport was also interspersed with large cutouts of Sheikh Mujib, Sheikh Hasina, Yasser Arafat, Nelson Mandela, and Suleiman Demirel (the Turkish prime minister). Huge banners welcomed these international guests coming to celebrate March 26, Independence Day, which would also mark the end of the yearlong celebrations of Bangladesh's twenty-fifth birth anniversary.

On the following morning, March 26 itself, I headed for a public meeting in the grounds of the Shaheed Suhrawardy Udyan (Martyred Suhrawardy Park), where newly elected prime minister and Awami League leader Sheikh Hasina would share the stage with Arafat, Mandela, and Demirel. Hasina's observation of Independence Day would be particularly significant, for she was also the daughter of the charismatic leader and the assassinated first prime minister of independent Bangladesh, Sheikh Mujibur Rehman. Earlier, I had watched on television as Hasina, along with the three foreign dignitaries, placed a wreath at the Savar Smritisoudho (Memorial of Memories) just outside Dhaka, where the government first takes all international guests. Hasina showed them the mass graves to the beat of a military guard of honor; then the tune of the national anthem, “Amar Sonar Bangla ami tomai bhalobashi” (My golden Bengal, I love you), written by Rabindranath Tagore,

a non-Muslim (Brahmo), Bengali Nobel laureate, filled the air. Now, at Suhrawardy Udyan, in the presence of the international guests, Hasina lit the Shikha Chironton (Eternal Flame) at the site of her father's historic speech given on March 7, 1971.² Here Sheikh Mujib had called Bengalis to struggle for national liberation through a movement of noncooperation. March 7 is deemed by the Awami League to be the trigger for the liberation war. Hasina declared that the flame of Muktijuddher Chetona (spirit of Muktijuddho) would burn forever so as to bring to fruition her father's dream of Sonar Bangla (Golden Bengal). Sonar Bangla is a romantic and nostalgic visualization of "mother Bengal," with her prosperous lands and rivers inhabited by a peaceful, harmonious, agrarian community, a timeless and an apparently classless imagery. Sheikh Mujib himself had developed this scene of eternal tranquillity—which evokes sorrowful longing and emotion for one's homeland—as a political project to infuse pathos into Muktijuddho (Bangladesh Liberation war of 1971) and a passion for post-1971 nation-building. As I stood on the fringes of this crowded meeting, everyone around me cheered as Mandela, Demeriel, and Arafat acknowledged Bangladesh's liberation struggle. It was a momentous feeling.

I next visited the Muktijuddho Museum, where the air reverberated with the revolutionary songs of Tagore and Nazrul Islam (the national poet of Bangladesh). The atmosphere was festive, with children accompanying adults, young women dressed beautifully in saris, and men in *punjabis*.³ Here exhibits decentered the Sheikh Mujib-focused celebrations and emphasized the role of common people in the liberation of 1971. The museum housed belongings of muktijoddhas and exhibited gruesome photographs of those who were killed and women who had been raped. In the museum café I met a mix of young and middle-aged people, many of whom expressed their hatred for Pakistan, saying that they refrained from buying clothes or fruit juices made there.⁴ One of them added, "So what if we hate Pakistan because of 1971? Hasina might talk of Muktijuddho, but she has just returned from the Organization of Islamic Countries Conference in Pakistan. Also have you seen her wearing the 'headband' *hijab* [veil] just before the June 1996 elections? She cannot seem to decide what Bangladesh should be—Bengali or Muslim!" At the same time, Pakistan, especially its cricket team and players, is, however, much more popular among the younger generation in Bangladesh. So, in my first few days I witnessed vivid examples of the inherent contestations in the national celebrations of independence earned as a result of the Bangladesh war of 1971.

In the week following the Independence Day celebrations, the leading newspaper dailies I perused all featured the Awami League and Bangladesh National Party (BNP) leadership debate between Sheikh Mujib and General Ziaur Rehman (see chapter 1). Each newspaper proclaimed that its favorite had led the 1971 war. It was evident that the Sheikh Mujib-centric state celebrations were meant to offset the preceding BNP government's militarized commemorations. The celebrations featured Bengali songs and poets in order to emphasize a Bengali identity. The ethos of Bengali identity and the "spirit" of the war of 1971—of which the left-liberal communities considered Hasina to be the repository—centered on principles of secularism, democracy, and Bengali nationalism, as opposed to the emphasis on Islam and Bangladeshi nationalism of the BNP and Jamaat-e-Islami (JMI). But the celebration and symbolism did not convince everyone: those with a fierce hatred for Pakistan's role in Bangladesh in 1971 strongly questioned the state's flirtation with Islamic and Bengali identity.

The research center with which I was affiliated employed leading Bangladeshi scholars from the different social science disciplines. Ranging from the lower middle class to the middle class, the scholars were not homogeneous, and tensions existed between the women feminists and other male intellectuals. But at the beginning of my fieldwork, everyone welcomed me warmly, referring to me as "the girl from Calcutta working on our 71," and I established long-lasting friendships with some of the feminist scholars, activists, and lawyers.

I was also increasingly unlearning my initial presumption—that the history of rape was absent from the metanarrative of the Bangladesh war. Instead, I found it continually invoked, especially in the state speeches and policies eulogizing the women as *birangonas*. I came across testimonies of rape in documents from after the war (from 1972 and 1973) and as the subject of museum exhibitions and voluntary narratives of *birangonas* in newspapers from the 1990s. I later found my way to the village of Enayetpur to conduct more in-depth fieldwork, specifically to talk to *birangonas* in their everyday lives today. Apart from the four women of Enayetpur (mentioned in the preface), I also worked with seven other women (from different parts of Bangladesh) who were raped in 1971: Chaya, Rukhshana, Afroza, Morjina, Bokul, Shiromoni, and Shireen. In Enayetpur, I was helped by Khokon Hossein, a young journalist who worked for a local newspaper. Wittily referred to in the village as the *shanghatik shangbadik* (ferocious journalist) for his keen journalistic aspirations, he facilitated my access to muktijoddhas in and around

Enayetpur for the purpose of interviews. At various local and national sites, I also interviewed and observed feminist and human rights activists and organizations, state officials, filmmakers, writers, and other producers of various literary and visual representations of the birangonas of 1971.

Spectral Wound is the result of this multisited fieldwork. It documents and analyzes the public memory of wartime rape perpetrated by the West Pakistani army and local Bengali men in East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) during the Bangladesh war of 1971. It seeks to explore the following questions: How is the raped woman invoked in the public memory of 1971? What is the relationship between this public memory and the experiences of women who were raped in 1971? The book tries to counter the limited and orientalized understanding of the impacts of wartime rape whereby the raped woman is only understood to be an “abnormal,” horrific, dehumanized victim, abandoned by her kin. It ethnographically analyzes the social life of testimonies, examining how the stories and experiences of raped women of the 1971 war became part of a broader set of national discourses and debates, bringing together testimonies and visual representations. It examines how these visual and literary representations of the raped woman create a public culture of “knowing” and remembering her that in turn informs the processes of testifying and human rights. The book argues that identifying raped women only through their suffering not only creates a homogeneous understanding of gendered victimhood but also suggests that wartime rape is experienced in the same way by all victims. *Spectral Wound* instead utilizes a political and historical analysis to highlight the varied experiences of wartime rape during 1971.

Addressing how the experiences of 1971 manifest today among women themselves and their families, this book triangulates the narratives with various representations (state, visual, and literary), as well as contemporary human rights testimonies. The book thereby examines the circulation of press articles, a range of oral accounts (interviews, discussion, observation, rumors, and gossip),⁵ images, literary representations, and testimonies of rape among survivors of sexual violence, their families and communities, the left-liberal civil society, and different governments and state actors. *Spectral Wound* also reflects on the silence relating to the violation and rape of men and juxtaposes it with the public memory of the rape of women. This allows a theorization of the relationship between the nation, sexuality, and masculinity and identifies issues of demasculinization in the husbands of raped women.

Razakars and Birangonas: The Past in the Present

Worldwide, the dominant understanding is that communities and nations consign sexual violence during conflict to oblivion and silence. It is understood to be a cost of war. In response to the assumed silence about wartime rape, feminists and activists have found it imperative to testify, to witness, to speak out, to “recover,” to give voice to raped women’s narratives. This witnessing is both a methodology and a politics, and feminists and activists characterize it as empowering, therapeutic, and liberating to those being given or finding their voice. Such activism has publicized the rapes of comfort women in Japan during World War II, the rapes in Bosnia and Rwanda in the 1990s, and sexual violence in Darfur and Congo.⁶

But wartime rape was already part of public conversation in Bangladesh in the 1970s, immediately after the Bangladesh war, and it has continued to be part of public discussion since the 1990s. Along with designating the raped women as birangonas, the Bangladeshi government also set up various rehabilitation programs and centers for the women in 1972, organized marriages for them, and helped them enter the labor market to guarantee that they were not socially ostracized.⁷ Whether successful or not, the effort by the new Bangladeshi government to publicly present women raped during 1971 as “war heroines” remains almost unparalleled. It is important to note that the Bangladeshi press did fall silent on the birangonas between 1973 and the 1990s, as did the government. The issue of wartime rape has, however, remained on the public stage, as a topic of literary and visual media (films, plays, photographs) since 1971, thereby ensuring that the raped woman has endured as an iconic figure. Real-life encounters with the birangona after the war have also contributed to the “knowing” of the birangona, as is evident in the following illustrations.

When I started my fieldwork in 1997, many personal accounts of war among a large number of people in cities, suburban towns, and villages featured “knowing” a woman who had been raped in 1971, “who lived next door,” “in the same road,” or “in the neighboring locality/village.” The woman in question would always be remembered through her “disheveled hair,” “her loud laughter,” or her “quietness” or “muteness,” or as “the one who stares into space” with “deadened-eyes.” Ratanlal Chakraborty of Dhaka University said that he saw many women roaming different parts of Dhaka city like vagrants after the war, from December 1971 until February 1972: “Their dress and movements were proof for many of us who were definite that they were victims of the war and that they had nowhere to go” (S. B. Rahman 2002). In various personal

communications during my research, individuals from different class backgrounds would remember returning after the war and encountering a “raped woman.” I cite here responses of three individuals:

We were in Babur Road when we returned to Dhaka and there was a house across the road where we saw many women with their unkempt hair, coming out on the road, purposelessly. We could hear their laughter at night.

When we returned after the war, there was a woman next door who looked unstable. . . her hair was all over her face and she was always quiet—we knew she was raped.

After the war, my father saw thousands of raped women standing still, back to back, against a truck. Not a hair moved among them and there was no sign of life in their eyes. They were mute, with deadened eyes like Qurbani, sacrificial cattle. Whenever I utter the word *birangona* I invariably think of that image. (Gazi 2014)

These postwar encounters with the raped women resonate powerfully with the famous “hair photograph” and the way various people referred to it to make sense of their own wartime encounter. It is telling that while the staging of the play *Birangona* draws upon the memory of the director’s father (as mentioned earlier in the Preface), the theater company also chose the hair photograph on its poster to stand in for this memory of the birangona.

Alongside the figure of the birangona in these narratives is the figure of the *razakar*, a male collaborator. Local Bengalis and Bihari Muslims collaborated with the Pakistani army in the rapes and killings during 1971. Bangladeshis refer to them as *razakars*, which means volunteers or helpers in Persian and Urdu, but they use the term pejoratively, as the name Judas might be used in Europe or Mirjafar in West Bengal, India—insults based on historical figures of betrayal. Numbering around fifty thousand, *razakars* are deemed to be those who spoke Urdu, came to East Pakistan (later Bangladesh) during the 1947 partition, and were members of the religious reactionary parties like JMI (Salek 1977), Al Badr, and Al Shams (which formed “peace committees” during the 1971 war). Their collaboration with the Pakistani army resulted in the death of anywhere from 300,000 to 3 million civilians (these numbers are contested numbers, depending on who is articulating them), the death of around 18 to 50 “intellectuals,”⁸ the rape of hundreds of thousands of women (these numbers also are contested, varying between 100,000 and 400,000), and 25,000 to 195,000 forced pregnancies.

The left-liberal activist community stereotypically represents the razakar with a beard and a cap, as signifiers of “Islamic” identity.⁹ Since 2009, the government has tried many of these collaborators at the controversial war crimes tribunal in Dhaka and has sentenced six to death. On December 12, 2013, one of those being tried for these war crimes was executed in the midst of jubilation as well as anger. Nonetheless, in independent Bangladesh, powerful razakars have gained political power. Some were cabinet ministers in the government led by Khaleda Zia and the BNP, in 2001. Some of them are Islamicists who belong to—or are politically closer to—JMI, the right-wing Islamic party.

The razakar and the birangona are iconic figures in the public memory of 1971: male and female, perpetrator and survivor, both public and both secret, both being memories of that past which are erupting and shaping the present. That in contemporary Bangladesh there is need for the razakar to be punished is powerfully shown through the following vignette. Heard in nearly all parts of Bangladesh, it establishes a direct relationship between the raped woman and the collaborator.

A razakar who once provided women to the Pakistani army falls prey to his own deeds. On a day when there are no women to provide, the Pakistani general rapes the razakar’s own daughter. The daughter commits suicide after disclosing her father’s betrayal to the villagers. I found this story in books published in the 1990s documenting the narratives of torture and violation of 1971. Syed Shamsul Haq’s famous play, *Payer Aoj Paoa Jai* (Footsteps can be heard; [1976] 1991), focuses on this account of rape, which I also found to be the content of various dramatized stage plays and televised serials. The ubiquity and consistency of this account of rape through its circulation through literary, press, and media accounts might suggest that this narrative enables people to imagine how a collaborator might have been punished, seemingly possible only by the rape of his daughter! The punishment meted out to the razakar through his daughter’s rape also alerts us to the prevailing discomfort toward the birangonas’ transgressed sexuality. The reactions to the “hair photograph” typify this discomfort.

The ceaseless exchange across national and cultural boundaries of this visual economy of the birangona in this public, and its intertextuality (the intertwined, circulatory traces of discourses, symbols, and images that cross-reference each other in different texts, contexts, and times) with witness accounts have significantly contributed to the efficacy of this representation of the raped woman as a horrific “wound.” It is important for me to clarify my use of “wound,” a psychoanalytically loaded term that has been all too easily

invoked to mean something painful that bears witness to a forgotten trauma and past injustice. This definition allows a seamless, ahistorical sliding of individual trauma into collective trauma. Instead, I use “wound” literally to refer to the physical and social injuries through which different Bangladeshi publics identify and thereafter circulate, know, and imagine the iconic figure of the birangona. This “hair” image has brought the horrific events of 1971 to the attention of an international public, the image standing in for the continual wounded history of Bangladesh.

Feminist Oral Historiography and Public Memory

My focus on the gendered narratives of sexual violence occurring during times of conflict builds on the theoretical, methodological, and ethical concerns emerging from the scholarship of feminist oral historiography relating to the partition of 1947 (Butalia 1998; R. Menon and Bhasin 1998; Das 1995) and women’s experience in 1971 (D’Costa 2011; Saikia 2011). Drawing on testimonies and documents, these works alert us to the ethical pitfalls of uncovering these narratives. This is a concern of contemporary significance given the continuation of sexual violence during conflicts, including the current rapes perpetrated by the Indian army in its attempts to suppress resistance to its authority in Kashmir, in the northeastern states, and in Sri Lanka during the civil war. In fact, unconfirmed reports alleged that soldiers of the Indian Peace Keeping Force in Sri Lanka raped Rajiv Gandhi’s “suicide bomber” assassin (Dhanu or Thenmozhi Rajaratnam).¹⁰

The history of partition is the poignant account of deep mental and physical violation of women, as is made clear by the rich scholarship on partition violence that was published in the 1990s: *The Other Side of Silence* (Butalia 1998), *Borders and Boundaries* (R. Menon and Bhasin 1998), and *Critical Events* (Das 1995). These works show how “non-actors are shaped by an epochal event and how their response enables a critique of political history” (R. Menon and Bhasin 1998, 16). Throughout this book, I draw extensively on Veena Das’s (1995) theorization of the relation between language, body, pain, and the state via the lens of women affected by the anti-Sikh riots of 1984 and the partition of 1947. Through oral history narratives, Butalia highlights how partition divided families, how they rebuilt lives, what resources they drew upon, how the trauma of displacement and losing one’s home shaped their lives, and the indispensability of “low-caste and low-status” jobs in the context of conflict. Butalia, Das, and Menon and Bhasin were the first to focus on the role of family violence and “honor killings” (as a mark of masculine honor)

of women during partition, Telling the stories of women who had resorted to violence by killing themselves, and how their families could only recall them as heroic martyrs (e.g., Butalia 1998, 62), their work shows how scholars and others usually conceptualize violence as male and patriarchal.

My work on the testimonial cultures of the public memory of wartime rape also engages with two academic books on the gendered account of the Bangladesh war that have provided a timely framework for debates relating to women's experiences of 1971: Bina D'Costa's *Nationbuilding, Gender and War Crimes in South Asia* (2011) and Yasmin Saikia's *Women, War and the Making of Bangladesh: Remembering 1971* (2011). From a feminist approach based in the disciplinary paradigms of international relations, D'Costa (2011) tracks in detail the trajectory of nationalism in Bangladesh, the sequence of events from 1947 to 1971, and the impact of the war on Hindu victims. Drawing on the hope of *insaniyat* or *manushyata* (the capacity to recognize the shared human condition), Saikia (2011) attempts to map out a transformative, empowering, responsible space in response to the violent narratives of 1971. Many of her respondents show an inner capacity for humanity in the midst of violence and war. Saikia includes the narratives of five women raped during the war, referring to them as "victims" and distinguishing them from liberation fighters. Saikia mentions other narratives and describes three women who were involved in providing various services during the war, two female liberation fighters, and two men—a Bengali liberation fighter who had also committed rape and a Pakistani soldier—who were the perpetrators of violence during 1971. Her work is important for its focus on the experiences of a Bihari woman, a war baby—Beauty—who struggles with her mother for a true account of the events of her birth and its focus on perpetrators.

I agree that as a supplement to existing women's history, oral histories can give a texture and quality to women's lives. Also, just as the anti-Sikh riots of 1984 became a trigger for an exploration of the violent, undocumented events of the partition of 1947 (Das 1995), similarly, in Bangladesh in the 1990s, feminists and human rights activists sought to document women's oral histories of their rape of 1971 and try the collaborators of the Bangladesh war. This created the conditions that enabled various women to narrate their violent histories of 1971 and their post-1971 life trajectories.

While drawing on oral histories and narratives of the women affected, following work by Das, Butalia, and Menon and Bhasin, I also draw on government speeches, documents, and interviews with social workers and other authorities who worked among these women. These invaluable archives of social memory have allowed me to think through how the state, when seeking

to implement rules for the supposed best interests of its citizens, actually exercises violence covertly. In the case of partition, Das (1995) examined at length the intervention of the Pakistani and Indian states in bureaucratically “recovering” Hindu and Muslim women “abducted” into Muslim and Hindu communities to police the sexuality of women in the name of securing their well-being. D’Costa’s work also examines the state processes regarding children born during 1971, homeless widows, and the role of various leaders, doctors, missionaries (respondent M and Geoffrey Davis in D’Costa 2002), and social workers.

While drawing on oral history, this book also identifies the limitations of depending solely on it. I am particularly cautious of how oral history, testimony, and memory are often invoked uncritically in retrieving “untold stories” of a “real past,” an approach that has been critiqued by historians and anthropologists: “Popular memory, has come to be increasingly important as an alternative, oppositional archive that allows access to ‘untold stories’ of a ‘real past’ that can presumably be tapped into by simply posing the right questions” (M. Sarkar 2006, 140).

I am wary of the attempt to “recover” and give “voice” and here borrow the words of Veena Das: “It is often considered the task of historiography to break the silence that announces the zones of taboo. There is even something heroic in the image of empowering women to speak and to give voice to the voiceless. I have myself found this a very complicated task, for when we use such imagery as breaking the silence we may end up using our capacity to ‘unearth’ hidden facts as a weapon” (2006, 57). I agree with Sarkar and Das and instead focus on “testimonial cultures” (S. Ahmed and Stacey 2001) to examine the dominant narrative through which sexual violence during the Bangladesh war is described in the public memory. I follow the ethnographic and historiographical work of scholars who have all focused on a post-event trajectory among their informants.¹¹ In the process, they have engaged critically with the prevalent idea that speaking/having a voice can alone be healing. Further, they explore the social life of these testimonies to examine how narratives can be appropriated in various contexts.

My argument and emphasis on examining wartime rape within its post-conflict dynamics and political framework have also gained succor from two works: Skjelsbæk’s (2012) book on the political psychology of war rape in Bosnia, and Baaz and Stern’s (2013) unpacking of the power dynamics of rape as a war crime in Congo. Skjelsbæk argues against a unified experience of ostracization of the raped woman. Similar to Bangladesh, “Commentaries

and academic publications on the war rape tragedy in Bosnia have argued almost with one voice that raped Bosniak women would be stigmatized and ostracized by their families” (2012, 46). She shows through her case studies that the postconflict experience is not so homogeneous, and that women continue to live with their families and husbands in spite of their articulated experience of wartime rape. Skjelsbæk argues that femininity, masculinity, and violent political power struggles interact in constructing the meaning of sexual violence in armed conflict in Bosnia. In fact, positioning oneself as an ethnic victim of wartime rape makes possible the construction of a survivor identity and creates solidarity—a solidarity that supersedes the patriarchal relationships in the family. Baaz and Stern (2013) explore the power relations in feminist engagements relating to rape as a war crime in Congo—deemed “the rape capital of the world.” They show how “a generalized story of rape in war limits our abilities to analyse and redress instances of sexual violence in specific warscapes as well as to attend to those people whose lives are circumscribed by such violence” (Baaz and Stern 2013, 5).

While drawing extensively from this scholarship on the birangonas, feminist oral history, and ethnography, *Spectral Wound* adds to and reframes this literature in three ways. First, it contextualizes these narratives within their complex representational postconflict politics and locates them within visual, literary, and national representations. In this book the small, individual voices not only are connected to the national narratives but also address events of 1971 and the 1990s. Given the presence of a substantial visual representation of the birangonas, I contextualize most of the images through discussions with their photographers and various audiences. This multisited view is absent from any of the existing work on birangonas, where images are often cited without analysis and sometimes without acknowledgment of the photographers. Saikia, in describing her book as “women’s memories as told by women” (2011, 15), has also suggested that “women’s memories cannot be subsumed within categories and reduced to analytical frames” (11) because they are the sites of an embedded past. However, if women’s testimonies are deemed to be sacred, both without and above politics, how could we map the hierarchies in the representational, discursive, and testimonial politics that we find in the public memory of wartime rape of the Bangladesh war of 1971? In highlighting the political and representational complexity of the issues surrounding the subject of public memory of wartime rape in 1971, *Spectral Wound* connects the complex ethnographic social relations among the birangonas to discourses at the level of local politics and to the representational

overlay in state-sponsored ceremonies, film, and oral history and documentary projects, as well as to the emergence of the *birangona* in popular culture such as magazine advertisements, poetry, and short stories.

Second, the book also argues for the existence of both public memory and public secrecy, in contrast to the prevalent understanding that there has simply been silence about wartime rape and that we need to give voice to these narratives.¹² I found a public invocation of wartime rape in Bangladesh in instances of government speeches, in the state reference to women as *birangonas*, and in literary and visual representations. Again, I acknowledge that this public memory of the representation of the *birangona* was not complemented by narratives of the experiences of real *birangonas* (apart from two testimonies in Rahmana [1982–85, Vol. 8: 236, 398]) until the 1990s, when oral history projects on wartime rape were being carried out.

A focus on “breaking the silence” is unable to capture dual aspects of the history of rape of 1971 in contemporary Bangladesh and the interesting questions they lead us to. On the one hand, the very presence of the public memory of the *birangona* in Bangladesh is exceptional for most global instances of wartime rape. On the other hand, in my ethnographic research I found that, juxtaposed with this public memory, there exists a public secrecy of the histories of wartime rape. For example, I found that in rural areas, families and communities knew about the rape of the woman during 1971. They explain that the women “*haush kore jai nai, jor purbok oi kaaj hoise*” (the woman did not go on their own, but that “work” [rape] happened as a result of force). They would, however, prefer to not talk about it today for various socioeconomic reasons (as explored in chapter 3). At the same time, they would remember what not to forget and repeat it *as a secret*, a public secret. Public memory and public secrecy thereby complement each other throughout this book. The public secrecy also exists in what I refer to as the “talkable history” for the *birangonas*, that is, the stories of their post-1971 trajectories. This is not addressed by oral history projects, which focus predominantly on the experience of rape of 1971 (chapter 2). This book addresses the dynamics of public secrecy in relation to 1947 and partition (chapter 1); the role of scorn in villages coping with the history of rape during 1971 (chapter 3); the local politics of appropriation and hidden transcripts (chapter 4); testimonial cultures and the presence of a wound rather than trauma (chapter 5 and conclusion); the fragmented experiences of men, demasculinization, and silence about the violation of men compared with the public memory of the rape of women during 1971 (chapters 5 and 7); and the way in which the *birangona* is portrayed

as a traitor (chapter 9). An examination of public secrecy captures the social nuances of life trajectories after wartime rape, which the paradigm of voice/silence, darkness/light is unable to address.

Third, while focusing on gendered narratives, *Spectral Wound* not only examines the experiences of women but also brings to the surface men's relationships to sexual violence, and sexuality's link to the nation (similar to Zarkov's [2001] work in the case of Croatia). I also examine the role of men, masculinity, and the vulnerabilities of patriarchal men linked to the public memory of wartime rape during 1971.

Overall, then, the book draws from existing scholarship on feminist oral historiography but also restructures it considerably. It focuses not only on the experiences of women but also on those of men; examines public memory and public secrecy of wartime rape rather than seeking to highlight silent narratives; and finally contextualizes the narratives within wider political, literary, and visual discourses. The book shows how the accounts of rape survivors manifest various national policies and narratives, and it also interrogates them. It explores the political functions and the social ramifications of testimonial witnessing within national processes, as women sought redress for violent pasts. As a result, the book not only focuses on the power and limits of representation of the figure of the war heroine but also connects discourse with institutions at several levels. The book thus stands in a complex relationship to the Bangladeshi nationalist narrative, highlighting its ambiguities and tensions with everyday lives and imaginaries relating to wartime rape during 1971.

How to Do Ethnography of Memory, History, and Violence?

How to conduct ethnography of violence is an important ethical and methodological question. I sought to avoid making the women conspicuous, to prevent exacerbation of their varied social situations, and to contextualize their experiences within local politics and history. As a result, my work explores the circulation,¹³ dialectics, and social context of the testimonies of rape, rather than mirroring the prevalent practice of providing a linear, voyeuristic description of accounts of sexual violence. In the following section, I explore specific ethical and methodological issues of memory, positioning, and authority.

The historical trajectory of Bangladesh contains many ruptured pasts, in which one identity has prevailed over another at different times. Today the history of the war is a festering, unreconciled one. What are the roles of history and memory? Academics and nonacademics within and beyond Bangladesh situate them in a hierarchy of credibility. Talking about my research, I would often be asked: “Memory! How would you know it is true?” People distinguish memory from history through a series of oppositions: whereas memory is subjective, authentic, and individualized, history is objective, reconstructed, and collective.¹⁴ Rather than valorizing and romanticizing either history or memory as distinctive authentic tools, my work focuses on the discursive, circulatory, intertextual, and dialogical account of public memories.¹⁵ Both history and memory draw from dominant narratives that can also supply the very terms of recall. As Antze and Lambek have argued: “Memories are never simply records of the past, but are interpretive reconstructions that bear the imprint of local narrative conventions, cultural assumptions, discursive formations and practices and social contexts of recall and commemoration” (1996, vii). An ethnographic perspective on the public memories of wartime rape of 1971 allows us to explore the multiple voices and their individual and social aspects of remembering (as well as forgetting) within political and historical contexts.

Exploring the public memories of wartime rape of 1971 within the context of the “institutionalized memory”¹⁶ of an Awami League government was bound to have an impact not only on what of 1971 people remembered but also on how they recalled and transmitted those memories to others, including me. So rather than a search for “the core of knowledge,” through which informants “may be dressing up differently in different genres” (Vansina 1985, 32), I try to examine the form that people’s retelling takes and the reasons this form seemed more suitable for the birangonas to narrate their experiences. In particular, it is important to understand how people repeated rumors to negotiate uncertain situations, and I was careful to explore how people began and closed their retellings.

Interviews, discussions, oral histories, and testimonies also cannot be understood outside the “constitutive social relationships and framework of exchange” (Tonkin, Macdonald and Chapman 1989, 90) between the narrator and the interviewer. Following Shahid Amin, I have “not used oral history as a seasoning to enliven documentary evidence” (1995, 194). My attempt has been to arrive at an enmeshed, intertwined, and imbricated web of narratives

from every available source. It is the exposition of the framework of exchange between the narrator and the interviewer and the conditions under which the testimony is produced that can alone provide an ethical and subjective-objective understanding of the narrative.

FRAMEWORKS OF EXCHANGE AND ETHICS

Although I stayed with one of the powerful families in the village (they felt they had to host the foreign researcher), I started my fieldwork by interviewing various liberation fighters in the village and the surrounding areas. My research assistant, Khokhon, helped me connect with people. In due course, the women invited me to visit them and talk to them about their experiences. In the midst of the discussions about the 1990s, the women started talking to me in fragments about their experiences of 1971. My in-depth participant observation in the village—talking with the women in their homes, accompanying them to visit their relatives' homes, and meeting with local council leaders and liberation fighters—gave me multifaceted insights into their daily interactions. It also helped me map their claims on and encounters with the state at the local and national levels. At the same time, my interviews and discussions with local liberation fighters and villagers contextualized the women's rape during 1971 within the local politics and history of 1971 and the 1990s.

I have predominantly worked with the four women in western Bangladesh, as well as seven other women in other parts of Bangladesh. Various interpersonal connections and public testimonies in newspapers led me to work with these women in particular. My multiple subjectivities—a single, young, middle-class, Bengali Indian woman with an upper-caste Hindu surname, based in Calcutta and studying in London—were interrogated by various Bangladeshis. I was an insider-outsider, which both enabled and hindered ethnographic connections,¹⁷ as well as manifested in novel ethnographic *maya* (attachments), dilemmas, and encounters. This was “fieldwork at home,”¹⁸ to a certain extent, enabling me to relearn our common and different histories. Though I would reiterate that I was from India and not from Bangladesh, people would rationalize that, since I was working on the Muktijuddho and since I am Hindu (as is apparent from my surname), I had to be sympathetic to the Awami League because of its pro-Hindu and pro-India policies.

My “upper-caste Hindu” identity proved to be a hindrance in establishing the authenticity of my personhood. I was living in a Muslim household, and people considered this inconsistent with my Hindu norms. Was I actually Muslim and hence Pakistani (as I was considered fair-skinned)? A photograph

showing my mother tall and fair-skinned, stereotypical physiological markers of the “military”—the term used in Enayetpur to refer to the Pakistani army—only exacerbated their uncertainties. News spread of my present location in London, that I have a white *moner manush* (person of one’s own “heart”), and that I consumed beef—all of which made me a Christian. Specifically regarding narratives of rape in Enayetpur, people would tell me that being unmarried and *changra* (a colloquial term to mean young), I would not understand the bodily processes of a sexual relationship and hence could not discern the violence of rape.

I picked up Bengali Muslim practices relating to language and food, which helped me connect with various communities. Choice of words and language is a significant indicator of the speaker’s Hindu or Muslim identity in Bangladesh. When I was in Bangladesh, I got into the habit of using the word *pani* for water, like my Muslim interlocutors.¹⁹ But minority Hindus in Enayetpur continuously criticized me for doing so (they used the word *jol*; Mookherjee 2008a). I realized that my position of privilege allowed me to engage with Muslims in a way that the Hindus in Enayetpur might not. Then, on further reflection, it occurred to me that my “crossing over” was blurring the “authenticity” of my personhood. For the Hindus, my adoption of what they perceived as “Muslim” practices suggested something about my “bad” family background and upbringing; it was also a threat to the practices themselves that were important to them in upholding their identity as a minority Hindu community, which they already perceived to be under threat.

Given the sensitive and difficult nature of the topic of wartime rape and the involvement of the lives of individuals affected by it, I have felt discomfort in carrying out this research and am troubled by issues of authorship and representation. I negotiated a complex terrain of power dynamics with informants among the local village elites and also among left-liberal intellectuals in Dhaka. This showed me how configuring power as emanating only from the anthropologist toward the informants is limited in the context of the dilemmas relating to my multisited research, and which George Marcus (1998, 121) has cautioned us against (see chapter 9). In this world of multisited ethnography, multiple actors from weak, ambiguous, and strong positions of power all manage ethnographic engagement. I straddle two boats: Spivak (1993) cautions that research and representation are irreducibly intertwined with politics, power, and privilege. Taussig (1987) challenges anthropologists to be self-critical of their historical and contextual positions and to speak out against the injustices they encounter in their research “habitus.” Although the women were hostile to me initially, over time their trust and friendship

emerged in response to my role as an advocate of their causes (I was very careful in this role and did not make any false promises). They instead worried about my vulnerability when traveling alone as a foreigner and a *changra* (young) woman. As a result, my role was not necessarily always endowed with power: they chose to ignore me when they wanted and narrated their accounts in their own way and their own time.²⁰

Over the years and before my fieldwork, the women had written various letters to the prime minister requesting a meeting to allow them to narrate their experiences of injustice (see chapter 4). They sent these letters via various individuals who were notable, national figures in the field of human rights with access to the head of state. An inherent tension exists between the researcher and those she works with given the imbalance between the attempt to uncover problems and the ability to solve them. There was a moral imperative for me to communicate to the national actors the birangonas' need to highlight their "lot of history, a severe history." I was, however, careful to avoid "the delusions of political activist grandeur" (Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois 2004, 26). I took advantage of my foreign researcher status and brought the women's letters again to some of these individuals. I did not expect my efforts to be any more successful than others' similar interventions, but the prime minister's office called the women in early April 1998, soon after I delivered the letters. My status in Enayetpur changed. No longer did the women and the villagers consider me a young, foreign woman of no use. Now they were sure I had direct access to the prime minister, which was certainly not the case. Much as I tried to correct this misconception, the idea was not easily dislodged. At the end of my fieldwork, I also established contact between the birangonas' children, who were looking for jobs, and a liberation fighter turned industrialist in Dhaka. This muktijoddha hired them (and they continue to work for him). After my fieldwork, my research on sexual violence has been successfully used by the activist network Drishtipat to raise \$15,000 for the purpose of seeking compensation for thirteen war-affected women.²¹ So this post-fieldwork situation could be seen to bestow power on me in terms of my continuing relationships with these women. Nonetheless, power was not always linearly inflected in every aspect of our relationships and friendships.

Central to this book are ethical concerns relating to the narratives of sexual violence, and the conflicts and contradictions of working with confidential accounts, on the one hand, and public secrecy, on the other. When I asked the women directly whether I should anonymize their names in my writings, they said that I should use their own names because it is "our own *kotha* (words),

mela itihash (a lot of history), *ja ma tomare ditesi*" (what mother we are giving to you [referring to me as "mother," which is an affectionate term used for younger women by older women]). Yet at other moments, the women would ask me to erase their names whenever I found them on the pages of any other book. Given the sensitivity of the material and the understandably contradictory positions of the women, I have used pseudonyms in all instances. The women had publicly acknowledged their history of rape in newspapers and within a civil society movement in the 1990s, which seemed to nullify ethical concerns about doing research with them. But the experiences of the women during 1971 were a public secret in Enayetpur (see chapters 4 and 5). All the villagers knew that I was "studying" the history of 1971 in and around Enayetpur. The women and their families were aware that I was specifically exploring the history of rape during the war. Maybe the villagers who were interrogating the reason for my presence in the village realized that I knew of the women's history (having read about it previously in newspapers), but they could not easily articulate that suspicion. The layers of collusion and misapprehension in our relationships can be best described as "partial fictions (. . . not falsehoods)" that lie at the heart of anthropological field research (Geertz 2000, 34).

Maybe we all knew what not to know. The powerful regulative ideal of rapport with the women, their families, and the villagers undoubtedly enabled my research. However, it sits here with complicity—what Geertz refers to as the key rapport-defining act, an "anthropological irony" of fictions that each side accepts.²² When I lived with the women for eight months, I found it unthinkable to ask them direct questions about what happened to them in 1971 during the war. Instead, I listened to how the women and their families spoke and what they wanted to narrate—namely, the events in the 1990s—which I have referred to as "talkable" history. Though the women did not talk about their experience of the war, they instead showed how they folded this violence (Das et al. 2000) into their lives through various everyday gestures, narrative fragments, and embodied narratives. These became powerful modes of conveying what of 1971 the women wanted to communicate. By focusing on these fragments, and eschewing linear and testimonial and formal narratives, I have tried to refer to sexual violence without making it "inauthentic" of the experiences of birangonas or "pornography of violence" (Daniel 1996, 4).

Much has been written by feminist oral history scholars about the ethical dilemmas of representing the voices of women, which ends up being the researcher's interpretation and representation. Butalia, Saikia, D'Costa, and Menon and Bhasin rightly point out the contradiction between feminism and

ethnography and the competing goals of enabling change among the people we work with and yet appropriating voices for the purpose of publications, job prospects, and career enhancement. While all of this is true, I do not consider birangonas to be victims and instead see these women as negotiating complex terrains of sociality and history. Because they were narrating their account publicly, I have not “broken” their silence irresponsibly and unproblematically. A focus on fragments of their narratives and on their everyday sociality also highlights the dark humor through which they astutely engage with their experiences of 1971 and post-1971 socialities alongside their husbands, communities, and the national activists. Heeding the caution of various feminist scholars about the extractive nature of ethnography, I definitely do not view the women and their families as faded subjects, and I value above anything the affectionate and strong ties of contact that they maintain with me. Throughout this book I try to raise various questions about the political, experiential, and representational complexity of the issues surrounding the subject that are perhaps by nature irresolvable and cannot be untangled.

Whenever I have explained my research, a common response has been how hard it must have been for me to carry out this project. The horror and pain of sexual violence that saturate the materials have weighed me down emotionally. Academic analysis of these materials often seemed banal. The despair, frustration, and inarticulability of the pain and suffering of the birangonas of Enayetpur often left me numb. I took sides when communicating the distressing situation of the women against the intellectuals and their appropriation of the women’s narratives. Yet I tried to identify the emotions and interests of members of the activist community, the injustice of their own unreconciled war experiences that they grappled with and their personal traumas of having lost loved ones through violent deaths. My friendships with the women and their families in Enayetpur, other friends in the village, my hosts turned family friends, and some of the feminists, filmmakers, and human rights lawyers in Dhaka persist today and enabled the continuation of my fieldwork outside Bangladesh.

My knowledge of the historical narratives by the political Right (such as the BNP and JMI) is largely based on press reports and history textbooks from 1975 to 1995. The Pakistani account of 1971 is absent in this study. I am cognizant that as an “Indian,” “Hindu” outsider, my work critiques Bangladeshi nationalist narratives, political parties, and movements that are deemed to be progressive by the left-liberal networks. I feel trepidation at the thought that, like the Bharatiya Janata Party’s (BJP’s) appropriation of Taslima Nasrin’s work in India, my criticisms could be appropriated for the purpose of

Bangladeshi partisan politics and could be used to demonize Pakistan and strengthen the age-old India-Pakistan enmity. Such potential misinterpretations of this study are far from my intention. My critique of the politics of testimonies and memory could be easily misappropriated by recent revisionist accounts to say that “nothing happened in Bangladesh” and it was all Bangladeshi propaganda.²³ There is no doubt that East Pakistani women were raped by the Pakistani army and their local collaborators, as evidenced through the long-term fieldwork I and others have done. Significantly, the book also highlights how war itself results in various kinds of complicities: the acts of sexual violence undertaken by East Pakistani Bengali men on Bengali women within the context of opportunities thrown up by war, and the appropriation of land and resources by the powerful (both liberation fighters and collaborators) after the war. So the stories that emerge here are as much about complicities of the wartime situation itself as they are about the memories of the postwar context.

I must add an important note relating to the controversial issue of numbers, lack of documents, and various debates relating to the visual archive. Various sources have cited the number of dead during the Bangladesh war as between 300,000 and 3 million.²⁴ Similarly, the number of women raped varies from between 100,000 and 200,000 (Brownmiller 1975) to 400,000 (the number stated by an Australian doctor, Geoffrey Davis, in the special issue on genocide of *Banglar Bani*, December 1972; Hasan 2002). The historiography of these numbers is unclear. I am more interested in the role of these official, contested numbers that have canonized and come to stand in for the ravages of *Muktijuddho*.²⁵ The numbers have transformed the martyrs and raped women into a faceless, essentialized, and “enumerative community” (Kaviraj 1992, 20).²⁶ At the same time, the rape and killing of Bihari women and men by Bengali *muktijoddhas* has remained unaccounted for. Only recently have many feminist scholars and filmmakers within and beyond Bangladesh begun to address this issue, rupturing the nationalist narrative.²⁷ They describe, as I have, how wars and conflicts are rife with instances of violence, kindness, cowardice, complicity, and contradictions by the same individuals. By means of testimonies, they show the multiple, contradictory subjectivities of the Bangladesh war experience and the violence inflicted upon the poor, women, Biharis, and *adivasis* (indigenous communities). My work starts where these testimonial forms end in order to explore how the private pain of wartime rape is made part of the public memory. This does not negate the horrific historical events that generated these injuries.

Achriye bar korlo (*Scraped/Combed
and Brought Us Out*): The “Combing” of History

One day, when I sat talking with Moyna (one of the war heroines in western Bangladesh), a stray dog, which had come for food, started scraping the ground with its paws. Pointing to the dog, Moyna said, “*Je bhabe ei kuttata achraiche, shei bhabe amader achraye bar korlo* [Like the way this dog is scraping the ground, we were also scraped/combed and brought out].” The poignancy in Moyna’s voice in this comment reflects her experience of being found, made visible, by *achraye* (being searched for and scraped out) in the 1990s. This experience of becoming a nationally known birangona along with her experience of rape in 1971 is intrinsic to her everyday life. Differently spelled, the verb *achraye/achrano* can mean scraping, scratching, or searching, as well as the act of combing hair—combing through hair (or testimonies) to find information, and also combing hair over to hide the face or a wound on the head (Cohen 1994). David Cohen (1994, xvii) develops the combing metaphor through American historian Herb Gutman’s narration in 1980 of the story of Camella Teoli, a figure who was injured during the 1912 strike of Lawrence mill workers and as a result had a scar on her head. Her daughter combed her mother’s hair to cover the history of this scar on her head. The metaphor of combing (Cohen 1994, 246) expresses the processes of both remembering and occlusion—that both the war heroines and the documenters of their history undertake public memory and public secrecy alike. The comb represents simultaneously the power to reveal and search for knowledge and attempts to cover and veil knowledge from inspection.

We can also juxtapose Moyna’s *achrano* with the uncombed, disheveled hair of the birangona in Ahmed’s famous hair photograph (see fig. P.1). Many consider this image to be the horrific sign of shame, of the “abnormality” of being a birangona and the anonymity resulting from it. But the face covered with hair can also be read as the means through which the birangona is able to hide, the way in which her wound is “combed over.”

Here is the central dynamic of the testimonial culture prevalent in Bangladesh, which also brings out the central arguments of the book in relation to public secrecy and contextualization of testimonies within historical and political dynamics: the left-liberal community documents the birangona’s history of 1971, combing through and searching for information about her horrific wound; at the same time, the left-liberal community combs over, hides, and keeps out of human rights narratives the intricacies of the long-term and

in-depth impact of rape on the birangona and her family. In documenting the narratives of these public birangonas, human rights activists combed (searched for) the birangona's horrific wound as well as combed (hid) the intricacies of her life after the rape.

The important questions to pose, then, are these: What makes the raped woman visible and audible at certain historical junctures? And what makes her invisible and inaudible at that same moment? The 1990s narratives of women's wartime rape did not emerge because of the sudden end of censorship, because the women "broke their silence," or because society came to terms with its traumatic past overnight (James 2005, 145). Rather, the publication of a photograph of the Enayetpur birangonas and their mute testimony reignited the question of the role of the collaborators in the sexual violence of 1971. In the 1990s an organization in Dhaka brought together a number of raped women to testify about their experiences. This was part of a movement undertaken by the left-liberal "civil society" (see chapter 1 for a detailed discussion) to demand the trial of Gholam Azam, a razakar who had been reinstated in the political landscape of Bangladesh. When the photograph of the three women (from western Bangladesh) at this event was published on the front page of all leading Bangladeshi newspapers, it became a visual testimony of how women raped during 1971 were seeking justice in the 1990s against the collaborators. Although the women did not speak at the event, the photograph brought the topic of wartime rape back into the Bangladeshi press in the 1990s.

We need to frame this photograph within Bangladeshi and international politics. First, memories of 1971 were increasingly important in Bangladeshi politics of the 1990s, particularly in the trial of collaborators (like Gholam Azam) who had been politically reinstated during the fifteen years of military rule (1975–90). Second, the events of 1971 remain unacknowledged as genocide within international law because the Bangladesh war occurred in the context of Cold War politics, with the United States and China supporting Pakistan, and the Soviet Union supporting India and Bangladesh.²⁸ It is indeed "a war that time forgot" (Anam 2008). This nonrecognition of the Bangladesh war as genocide, combined with the United Nations' declaration of rape as a war crime in 1995 and the offer of apology by the Japanese government to the comfort women, led various Bangladeshi feminist and human rights activists to document histories of sexual violation committed during the 1971 war so as to provide supporting evidence to enable the trial of the collaborators.²⁹ It was imperative for many—especially those whose family members, friends, and loved ones were killed during the 1971 war (par-

ticularly the families of the martyred intellectuals)—to seek justice for these deaths by demanding the trial of collaborators. This process entailed a search for “grassroots,” “subaltern” “war heroines” and resulted in the recording of their testimonies of rape by various left-liberal journalists, feminists, NGO activists, and human rights lawyers.

Rather than a focus on silence and giving voice, *Spectral Wound* explores how the birangona is searched for and then hidden within the public memory of wartime rape of 1971. It illustrates how the war heroine is represented and viewed through the coupling of heroism and ambiguity, which ensures that only her “horrific” history of rape is told, not forgotten or silenced, even as the complexities of her life story are occluded from the prevalent discourse of the war.

Along with using the metaphor of “combing” to ethnographically examine the birangonas’ narration of the “testimonial culture,” I draw on Jacques Derrida’s *Specters of Marx* (1994) to deconstruct the visual and state narratives of the birangona as sites of enunciation or effaced invocation through the analytical tools of absent presence of the spectral war heroine. I am not using the word spectral to refer to a presence that hints at past injustices and is a resistive figure.³⁰ Rather, in the various documents of the history of rape, the sign of the war heroine—her narratives, her testimonies (in photographs, books, and newspapers)—is inhabited by “a play of absence and presence of the effaced but legible trace” (Derrida 1976, xvii). The frequency with which the birangona is evoked, brought into existence so that she can be effaced and exited, inscribes her with the logic of a specter. Thereby she can be subjected to a double sense of calling into presence in her absence and made safely available for the nation. *Spectral Wound* shows how various literary, visual, and testimonial representations put forward by left-liberal activists make the birangona disappear even while affectively invoking her, bringing into play at the same juncture both of the connotations of combing over—searching for and hiding. In the nation’s positive conceptual formulation of the raped woman,³¹ she can only be exemplified in the absence of her presence, through horrific enactment and representation as a wound, which ensures a greater invocation of her “trauma.” It is these wounds that allow Bangladeshi citizens to affectively feel the birangona so as to mobilize younger generations against the collaborators. At the same time, many Bangladeshis perceive her as a threatening figure because of her transgressed sexuality. The emphasis on the wound of the war heroine creates a pathological public sphere whereby the raped woman can only be perceived as a horrific alterity. Mark Seltzer (1997, 3) defines this as a public sphere that is mesmerized by stories of suffering and the spectacle of

the wounded and dismembered bodies. Lindsay French (1994) has shown how the spectacle of the bodies of land mine amputees in the Thai-Cambodia border becomes an important means for the mobilization of values to enable a visceral identification with these injured bodies, as well as a simultaneous repulsion of these bodies. The affective “knowing” of the birangona thereby transforms what constitutes a public sphere: to feel for the violent history of rape becomes the cornerstone of participation in Bangladeshi public life.³²

At the same time, even in the imaginary, the raped women are not homogeneous. As a symbol of the illegitimate presence of the other, various Bangladeshis also call her claim to the legitimate inheritance of the independent nation into question by interrogating her subjectivity. This interrogation is visible in the process of combing and the absent presence of the spectral wound of the birangona, in the violence exemplary of testimonial cultures. The book thus offers methodological prescriptions for how to avoid exacerbating the conditions of those whose testimonies are being employed by various activist movements. It suggests tools to activists who might be combing (searching), recovering voices of those they consider victims but also combing/hiding (effacing) aspects of the narratives of victims that do not fit into a predetermined construction of victimhood.

The tropes of combing over and absence-presence emerge in three interconnected spheres in Bangladesh: social relations and lives of war heroines who have been the subjects of state-sponsored memory projects; institutions and practices of left-liberal, activist, feminist, and human rights communities; and the imaginary of the raped woman in various commodity forms. Even though the birangona is present in state speeches, oral history documentation, and literary and visual texts, those texts construct her specific subjectivity by ejecting and transvaluing her into a defiling, horrific otherness; they keep her alive as a wound. Meanwhile, what constitutes “a lot of history, a severe history” for the birangona, her life history, remains unaddressed.

CHAPTER OUTLINE

Spectral Wound makes these interconnected arguments about public memory and public secrecy, absence-presence, and combing (searching and hiding) inherent in this history-making and effaced invocation of the birangona first through an examination, in chapter 1, of state historiography of the partition of the subcontinent in Bangladesh alongside the predominance of 1971. Chapter 2 shows how activists used the dynamics of combing (both searching and hiding) and absence-presence in documenting the women’s narratives of 1971 and the narratives of appropriation in the 1990s (the talkable history of the

women). Chapter 3 explores how villagers make the history of rape absent-present, combing (hiding and searching) it through *khota* (scornful remarks which reminds one of an unpleasant event) and maintaining public secrecy about local events of rape. The local politics described in chapter 4 comb (hide and search for) various instances of complicity and patronage. This chapter also shows how the state acknowledgment of the birangonas combs/hides their primary concerns. The embodied narratives discussed in chapter 5 comb (both search for and hide) the experiences of 1971 by focusing on fragments, as well as combing/hiding the intricacies of demasculinization of the husbands of the birangonas. These first five chapters constitute the ethnography in Enayetpur.

The public secrets, absence-presence, and “combing” inherent in this history making are explored in the historical, visual, and discursive contexts in the second part of the book through an examination of rehabilitation, violation of men, literary and visual representations, perceptions of the birangona as traitor, and human rights testimonies. Chapter 6, on rehabilitation policies, shows how women were re-membered and in the process combed/hidden within approved heterosexual relations. Chapter 7 explores how the public memory of rape of women does not address the violation of men, which in turn combs/hides the link between sexuality and the nation. Instead, through captions of photographs, the violation of men can be combed/searched. Chapter 8 examines how human rights enactments and literary and visual representations comb/search women’s narratives for the horrific, ambiguous figure of the raped woman. The public secrecy of this ambiguity of birangonas can be found in chapter 9, which examines their subjectivity as victim, agent, and traitor. In the process, we find that raped women’s claims to the category of birangona get interrogated based on their various subjectivities.

The third part addresses the politics of human rights frameworks and how narratives of wartime rape are transformed into public memories in contemporary Bangladesh. The book concludes by asking the broader question: What would it mean for activist politics to address sexual violence without configuring the raped woman as a wound? This has wider implications for laws relating to sexual violence, the issue of consent, and the way that the public makes sense of sexual violence in the everyday and in its omnipresent global occurrence during times of conflict. A conceptualization of the raped woman as wounded provides us only a narrow idea of the long-term consequences of sexual violence. If we focus on woundedness, we remain unable to see how violence is folded into the everyday lives of those who were raped

during the war. The persistent presence of the raped woman as a wound has also precipitated the assumption that there must be “silence” about wartime rape. In following and connecting the social lives, contexts of testimonies, and claims made by the war heroines on the state within the framework of local and national politics, *Spectral Wound* explores the effects of sexual violence during conflicts in everyday life. It provides a nuanced, complex understanding of how women and men negotiate and live with the violence of wartime rape.

The postscript to the book addresses changes in these dynamics since 2001, particularly changes in portrayals of wartime rape, with a final reflection on the Shahbagh movement and the Bangladesh war crimes tribunal. This opens out the questions I am asking in this book and allows them to intervene in the unfolding contemporary history of the public memory of wartime rape of 1971.