

Her body at War: Examining the violated bodies of war

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Abstract

Countries get made and broken by the various conflicts which are the consequences of political agendas and ideologies. Some of these conflicts have major roles to play in historical fiction. In turn, we understand the human condition of the past by analysing the historical fictions from different regions of the world. Historical fiction elucidates the political, ontological and social plights of those who are caught and trapped in the conflicts – women, bear on their bodies, the consequences of wars fueled and fought by aggressors as imprints. Some women take measures of survival—creating individual narratives in history which are usually buried under the language of valour and defeat of the nations. For my thesis, I will investigate women's positions during and after wars, the language around women's violation and how they are represented. Representation of these women (violated bodies of wars), constructed by societies, pave the way to form historical and political ideologies – weaving an acceptable collective memory of nation building. The language around these women leaves out silences that can be, in turn, analysed further to establish their political plights. This thesis looks into the position of women in wars by analysing three texts of historical fiction. There are three chapters, each dealing with one of the texts – the first is a short story about a woman from occupied France during the second world war; the second is on women from the Partition of India in 1947; and the last is on women from Bangladesh's Liberation War in 1971.

Keywords: violated bodies, war, women, representation, nation building, ideologies

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Introduction

I chose to work with three very difficult texts – knowing it might not be easy to complete my thesis to my heart’s content. However, I opted for W. Somerset Maugham’s short story *The Unconquered*, Bapsi Sidhwa’s *Ice-Candy-Man* and Shaheen Akhtar’s *Talaash* (I used the translation of the book *The Search*) – thinking it might help me delve into how nations are made and shaped by the “sacrifice” of the female bodies; the *birangonas* (“war heroines”).

I put the word sacrifice in quotes because it irks me to accept that patriarchal measures such as rape and other sexual abuse are taken in the name of nation-building and politics. Somehow, when the term is used – the crime it shrouds becomes more acceptable for the collective psyche of any people/nation. But should it be accepted? My attempt is not to answer that but to shed light on how horrific and wrong it is to use women’s body as an object or site of harm and a commodity in war. My attempt is to leave the deconstructed versions of the stories exposed to the readers so that they can say for themselves, “This is unacceptable.”

The Unconquered takes us to an uneasy place where we must decide who is the main torturer and who is being tortured. *Ice-Candy-Man* exposes the complexity of colonised territories which were being rebuilt at the stake of atrocities done on bodies – especially female bodies. *Talaash* helps us understand how the female body is always at war whether not there is nationwide declaration or celebration about it – the body is never excused from being desired or feared nor tormented or abused.

I tried to investigate the consequences of political agendas and ideologies of war and how some of these conflicts have major roles to play in historical fiction. Also, I chose historical fiction (the genre) and tried to show how relevant they are in the pursuit of understanding our

position on earth, as political bodies – especially as female bodies. Historical fiction explains the political, ontological and social plights of those who are caught and trapped in the conflicts (as I have earlier said in my abstract). The three characters I dealt with in my chapters “bear on their bodies, the consequences of wars that were fuelled and fought by aggressors as imprints” (I reiterate what I have said in my abstract).

For my thesis, I investigated women’s positions during or/and after wars, the language around women’s violation and how they are represented. Representation of these women (violated bodies of wars), constructed by societies, pave the way to form historical and political ideologies – weaving an acceptable collective memory of nation building. The language around these women leaves out silences that can be, in turn, analysed further to establish their political plights.

Another reason why I chose the three stories is because I wanted to look into the three different wars that made a massive change into women’s lives. Since the crime of war that we are dealing with in the stories is rape, it should evoke the consciousness of the readers to question the patriarchal tool. I have used *Are women human?* by Catherine MacKinnon (briefly as/for definitions) and *The Body in Pain* by Elaine Scarry (in great detail) in all three of my chapters. I used Urvashi Butalia’s book *The Otherside of Silence* for chapter two and Nayanika Mookherjee’s *The Spectral Wound: Sexual Violence, Public Memories, and the Bangladesh War of 1971* for chapter three – because of the ethnographic research done by the two authors. I felt it is very important to pay attention to all the fragments of wars and all their different narratives (Indian Partition of 1947 and the Liberation War of Bangladesh in 1971).

I believe I could have done more work on the topic but due to word limitation and time constraint – I opted went with the hand full of theories I have mentioned as my primary sources and a few others as my secondary sources – all of which I have cited after each of the chapters so that it is easier for my professors and readers to cross-check. I have tried to only use the part of research which I thought were relevant to the stories and did not talk in details about other areas they deal with. I read Nilima Ibrahim’s “Ami Birangona Bolchhi” but I only used one of her interviews which has little to do with my thesis* – however, reading the book expanded my knowledge about the topic.

*Chapter three does not talk about *birangonas* who went abroad. I felt Nilima Ibrahim’s interview regarding the *birangonas* as opposed to the book – helped me tick the check list of “support” I needed for the claims I made in my chapter.

Second World War: Annette's story

The Unconquered is a 1943 short story by the British writer W. Somerset Maugham. It was included in his collection *Creatures of Circumstance* (1947). This is a very grim story which may look like it is only a tale about infanticide in war however, a closer look, offers more than that. Inspecting the title itself will divert our mind into the central character – a French woman whose body gets violated by a German soldier but her spirit does not get “conquered” by him. This story is perfect to look into the consequence of the Second World War which usually gets sidelined – the violated bodies of women who were at the backdrop at the massive chaos that rocked the entire world.

The central character is an “educated” (3) French woman from Soissons, Annette, who gets raped by the German soldier Hans. Hans’s arrogance and complete lack of repentance makes it easier for Annette to “hate” (16) him. Initially he taunts Annette (right before raping her) by saying: “You ought to understand that this is the best thing that ever happened to the French people. We didn’t declare war.” His announcement is equivocal, he boasts about his kindness which quickly turns into violence when Annette refuses to kiss him – he rapes her.

Later, Hans pays several visits to Annette’s house – bringing in bribes for her parents in the form of food. The more the girl resists his advances, the more he imposes his presence on her: “When he was ordered to proceed there it had occurred to him that it would be fun to go and have a look at the girl” (4). Hans’s futile attempts to win Annette’s heart makes him more frustrated and “because she was almost a lady it amused him to torment her” (5). He has no regard towards the fact that the girl actually sees him as her rapist and not as a potential suitor,

moreover Annette's politics about the war is very strong – she is a French nationalist who takes pride in being one.

Even though Annette expresses her hatred towards Hans more than once: “I don't want your presents. I'll starve before I touch the food you swine have stolen from us” (5), Hans does not back off. He insists on buying food for her parents who, to her complete surprise, accept Hans and his food as though it is completely normal. Hans too tries to normalise and prove he is good natured by bringing the rewards (food, in the time of great scarce).

The author does not offer the audience with enough details about the rape – but this unspoken “pain” (Scarry 3) that Annette carries in her is quite evident by the way she acts towards Hans. The dialogues are also very revealing. We get a sense of Hans's chutzpah when he imposes the power relation of the Germans on the French – his air of superiority makes his crime more unbearable. As though, “nowhere is the sadistic potential of a language built on agency so visible as in torture” (Scarry 27).

Hans says that he does not “desire” (7) Annette because he fancies “tall, full-breasted, blue-eyed, and fair-skinned” (7) women, and he finds her to be “intimidating”. But it “tantalizes him that she should have such a loathing for him” (7) – again, this exhibits the same “sadistic” nature that Scarry (27) talks about regarding language use – which is just a manifestation of Hans's personality.

Ironically, Hans's behaviour changes completely when he notices Annette's “swollen body” (9) – he thinks he is in love with her immediately. Now, he starts another pursuit for owning or controlling Annette's body – he tries to persuade her parents to get her married to him. In exchange, he would move in and take care of their farm. The food and security that Hans

offers is actually a way to “conquer” Annette more. Annette’s body is the location of the “pain” (Scarry 3) – it is also where her baby is growing. So she gets more and more aware of her suffering, and as the baby gets delivered, she feels completely broken.

"The person in great pain experiences his [one's] own body as the agent of his agony. The ceaseless, self-announcing signal of the body in pain, at once so empty and undifferentiated and so full of blaring adversity, contains not only the feeling 'my body hurts' but the feeling 'my body hurts me.'...If self-hatred, self-alienation, and self betrayal...were translated out of the psychological realm where it has content and is accessible to language into the unspeakable and contentless realm of physical sensation it would be intense pain." (Scarry 47)

She gets feverish – it is another way the author shows how Annette’s body reacts to the inhumanity done to her.

The moment Hans comes to their house at the last portion of the story, and hears of the birth of his child, he becomes ecstatic. However, Annette has already left the house by the time anyone realises. Hans and Annette’s parents try to find her. But when they do find her, she has already drowned her newborn in the nearby brook – submerging and drowning her past suffering. There is no way one can condone murder – but one must consider why Annette does what she does at the end – the act itself does not make her happy but it does stop Hans from invading her body further. She puts an end to his tyranny by taking the life of her own child who was part German – a term that would always take her back to the power relation, a place of desperation.

So when in this story, “infanticide is seen through the lens of the French people’s struggle against the Nazi occupation” (Élisabeth 48). However:

Infanticide is portrayed as an act of courage and a claim to survival as a woman’s ultimate realisation of her right to her own body. It is a case where a woman’s voice can be heard only at the cost of her baby’s life. (Élisabeth 48)

One can argue that the ending is too brutal as we naturally tend to have softness for babies and newborns (emblems of innocence and purity). But if the baby is taken as symbol of Annette’s past: the effect and then the cause of greater pain inflicted by Hans on her body, then we can sympathise with Annette. This is the dangerous territory of self-examination the author wants us to explore. Annette had no chance to abort the baby – the child born out of a crime committed on her body. She could have given the baby up for adoption, some might argue – but the state of her nation was not ideal for such an arrangement. She is in no position make her state any better, she appears to be “deathly white” (21) like a ghost at the end. She could have given Hans to kill her spirit even further – her swollen body is now sans her misery that befell her. But the memory of it, how different things could have been for her and her baby, breaks her down.

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1947: Ayah's story

Bapsi Sidhwa's "Ice-candy-man" deals with the horrors of the Indian Partition of 1947 through the eyes of a little Parsi girl Lenny based at Warris Road in Lahore. The sexual violation of women are shown in bits and pieces throughout the novel – the main piece, however, is shown through the character of Ayah – the house help at Lenny's house who is the most important source of care for the child besides her parents. There are descriptions of looting and rape in the middle of the story which sheds light on the mass displacement and exodus of religious groups between India and new state Pakistan.

The partition of India took effect on August 14, 1947 which led to the making of a new state Pakistan – a separate country, ideally politically mapped for the Muslim population of the nation. What had been a state of harmony, where Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists, Christians, Parsees and other minorities lived in peace, was divided due to the colonial residue that was left behind by the political ideology of the British – divide and rule. Around 14 million people were displaced in the aftermath of the partition. Around one million people were killed in the violence that accompanied the mass migration.

Ice-candy-man takes place in Lahore – where a close knit community of people of all religion could be seen living in harmony before partition and the plot rolls out to show the aftermath of partition. The air from the start of the novel is slowly heating up – the poison of the idea of "self" and "others" were growing and taking monstrous shapes in the hearts of the people. This idea however were conceptualised in the context of religion. Lenny's Ayah is Hindu, Ice-candy-man is Muslim who covets Ayah, and Masseur is also Muslim who loves Ayah and whom Ayah loves.

Ayah is a voluptuous and dark Hindu woman who attracts all kinds of attention from men – Lenny from the tender age and with the precocious point-of-view used to notice such attention: “The covetous glances Ayah draws educate me” (3). What begins as a playful and harmless flirtation between Ayah and the men – especially those who frequent Lenny’s house: Ice-candy-man, Masseur and Sharbat Pathan (the man who came to the house to *welt* knives).

Ice-candy-man is a man who used to change jobs according to what the season requires and when there is a demand for something. He is cunning and extremely jealous of Masseur and how close he is to Ayah. Even these did not seem like red flags to any of the characters at the start of the story – but when the riots between Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs erupt out of proportions and nowhere, Ice-candy-man’s vicious nature come to the foreground:

Mass scale migration, death, destruction, loss – no matter how inevitable Partition seemed no one could have foreseen the scale and ferocity of bloodshed and enmity it unleashed . . . still less could anyone have foreseen that *women* would become so significant, so central and indeed so problematic. (Butalia 188)

So Ayah’s fate was dictated by to what extent Ice-candy-man went to get her – possess her. At one point Lenny says: “Where Masseur is, Ayah is. And where is Ayah is, is Ice-candy-man” (121). This shows how insecure Ice-candy-man was to leave the two lovers alone – it should be noted that he already has a wife in his village so Ayah’s conscious was clear and she never led him on – she rejects his advances by slapping off his toes that he stealthily tries to push inside her saree. But Ice-candy-man does not let go, he slowly starts to exhibit his hypermasculinity. The first glimpse of it is, however, shown before the partition – when he harasses Muslim tenants at Sher Singh’s compound:

“Well, Sher Singh... and I...Armed with hockey-sticks we went to their tenants’

house while the men were at work. We made a bit of *hulla-goolla* outside the building... We attracted a crowd...When we had their [ladies] attention ...we opened our lungis! In such a way as to our rears: and in front our dangling dingdogs!” (123)

This description leaves Ayan “scandalised” but it was foreshadow of exactly what he does to Hindus after the riots – only murders, lootings, lynching and rapes take place during that time. His justification is – a train full of Muslims got slaughtered in Gurdaspur (149) and the people were not given a chance to plead. This event completely leaves him terrified but does that justify what he does later? This is what Lenny observes:

What I’ve heard is unbearable. I don’t want to believe it. For a grisly instant I see Mother’s detached breasts: soft, pendulous, their nipples spreading. I shake my head to focus my distracted attention on Ice-candy-man. He appears to have grown shades darker, and his face is all dried up and shriveled-looking. I can see that beneath his shock he is grieving. (149)

The kind of masculinity he uses to show his brotherly nature to his Sikh friends to shoo away the tenants – completely turns during the riots. He overtly calls him murderers and provokes them. He later does the same to Sher Singh and his sisters and forces them to leave Lahore (156). All this upsets Ayah who gets consoled by Masseur that he would take care of her. Ayah internalises everything that happens around her at this point – without anyone’s knowledge, the love of her life gets hacked by Ice-candy-man who dumps Masseur’s body. Next he goes to hunt for his object of desire – Ayah. In a moment of deceit, Lenny tells Ice-candy-man that Ayah is in the house when he convinces her that he would “protect Ayah” with his life however. The child fails to calculate the reason why a gang of Muslim men

turned up at their door looking for a Hindu maid. Lenny, who feels anxious about Ayah's well being with the arrival of the men, gives into Ice-candy-man's charms. This incident traumatises the child. She keeps thinking of Ayah, more so when Hamida (Ayah's replacement) comes to her household from the next-door refugee camp (which Lenny's aunt and mother run at the abandoned house of their Sikh neighbours) . Hamida calls the women from the camp who scream and cry at night "fallen women", she too is one of them as she sobs in Lenny's presence:

My heart is wrung with pity and horror. I want to leap out of my bed and soothe the wailing woman and slay her tormentors. I've seen Ayah carried away – and it had less to do with fate than the will of men. (214)

The kidnapped women were regarded as the "fallen" ones immediately since they would be raped or trafficked. The women who were at the camp were Muslim, the ones who are kidnapped by the likes of Ice-candy-man were Hindus mostly – just like Ayah.

Some 75,000 women were raped, kidnapped, abducted, forcibly impregnated by men of the 'other' religion, thousands of families were split apart, homes burnt down and destroyed, villages abandoned. Refugee camps became part of the landscape of most major cities in the north, but, a half century later, there is still no memorial, no memory, no recall, except what is guarded, and now rapidly dying, in families and collective memory. (Butalia, 2003)

We do not however get to know Ayah's fate after she gets rescued on the rehabilitation or reintegration into normal life – but this "collective memory" can be juxtaposed with that of Bangladesh's regarding the Liberation War, as I discuss in the later chapter when I analyse Shaheen Akhtar's book *Talaash*.

Cynthia Cockburn says: “Woman is [. . .] highly valued in nationalist discourse and often symbolizes the spirit of the nation [. . .] national movements transfix women as living boundary makers of the collectively” (Cockburn 43). This reiterates what Elaine Scarry says in her book *The Body in Pain* (1987) – these women’s body bears the marks that were used to make the boundaries of the new nation.

Next we find Lenny and Electric Aunt find Ayah Diamond Market where Ice-candy-man has turned her into a “dancing girl” (another euphemism of “fallen woman”) which turns out that he has gotten her involved in prostitution. Ayah is forced to convert too, her Muslim name is Mumtaz. Aunt confronts Ice-candy-man who by this time has to tame down due to the magnificent and powerful presence of the former. He pleads: “I am her slave... I worship her. She can come to no harm with me” (248). He uses the same words and promise of protecting Ayah, confesses that she is an object of “worship” to him (something one wants to possess and attain). But Aunt would not be swayed, she retorts: “You permit her to be raped by butchers, drunks, and goondas [vandals], and say she has come to no harm?” (248)

Even if he says he “saved” Ayah, by marrying her, from the clutches of other men who would have killed her (249), Aunt would not let go. Initially, Ayah feels ashamed – kidnapping is synonymous to being fallen. So she does not meet Lenny before leaving. Lenny cries: “I don’t want her to think she’s bad just because she’s been kidnapped” (254). Aunt finally saves Ayah and sends her back to her family.

As Catharine MacKinnon says: "no state effectively guarantees women's human rights within its borders" (148). This resonates with the story of Ayah, Annette (Somerset’s character from *The Unconquered*) and will with Mariam’s story as well. All these map

making, drawing of borders and the creation geopolitical “selves” were done at the stake of controlling women’s bodies – negotiating them within a political ideology where they did not voluntarily participate. Sidhwa’s story does not give an overall image of the state of women during partition by discussing different narratives and fragments, but one can understand the severity of the violence by just looking into what happened to Ayah.

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1971: Mariam's story

Shaheen Akhtar's *Talaash* (*The Search* translated by Ella Dutt) pieces together the fragmented stories and the narratives of the *birangonas* (a word that literally translates "war heroine" which is questionable – I will discuss that later in the chapter). The story is narrated by Mukti (which means liberty in Bangla) – a researcher who was born on the liberated soil of Bangladesh on March 26, 1971, making her as old as the young nation. *Talaash* centres on Mariam and all those like her who are violated sexually during war. Their violent fate ironically renders them as the so-called "war heroines" to the nation.

The story is a significant compilation of narrations which reflects and echoes the horrors of around two million women who were raped during the Liberation War of Bangladesh in 1971 and had to bear the burden of the atrocities done to their bodies most of their lives. The violence on their bodies does not start or end with war.

From the start, Mariam's body has been cataloguing different kinds of violence since she decides to go to the cinema with Jashimul Haque as a young and infatuated girl. A little act of holding hands makes the girl's parents send her to Dhaka and live with her brother – away from the villagers' scrutiny. However, could the girl stay away from such a hindrance? When she is in university, she meets Abed Jahangir – the student leader – who starts an affair with her, sleeps with her, impregnates her then asks her to forget about everything because he is more preoccupied with the upcoming war. Ironically, this same Abed sells out and marries a Pakistani girl to secure the fortune of his bride's father.

We get to witness what Catharine MacKinnon calls "systematic" (2013) violence done to women in Mariam's story. Abed repeatedly makes Mariam feel like "filth", calls her names

(“whore”) and even drives her away. Right before she is captured by the Pakistani military, Mariam takes refuge at an abandoned house called Swargadham (heavenly residence) where Rameez Sheikh – a Pakistani convict who was charged for murdering his wife – becomes her protector right after the war begins. However, Rameez Sheikh’s worshipper-like trance for Mariam gets out of proportions when the military turns up. Back at the camp when he is runs towards Mariam before his death symbolises how his urges to protect a woman which somehow he failed to do when it was his wife. When Mariam is in the camp, the brutal “systemic” (MacKinnon, 2013) sexual violence takes rabid toll on her body. Rape was used as a war tool – a weapon; and women were seen as “the *Ganimete Maal*, the spoils of war” (*The Search* 66). Mariam is separated by walls and joined by wails and screams with others like her in the camp. These women communicate – through the walls on which they leave behind the markings in bloodstains of the violence done to them and their bodies for nine months. Their clothes were stripped; their bodies bore only the marks of violence which was being done to attain “liberation”.

Anuradha, one of Mariam’s camp-mates, predicts their grim future: “Their place would be in the whorehouses of their own land and in foreign lands” (*The Search* 119). That is exactly what happens to Anuradha and many others, and what almost happens to Mariam. Why is then, one might ask this shroud of the term *birangona* necessary? One might say to make it easier for the whole nation to carry on living without the burden of independence which came at the stake of the rape of countless women. The mark of which loomed around the lives of the women throughout their lives – the very utterance of the word had the power to change the way people looked at them – mostly for the worst and seemingly for the best. The very “secrecy” of these women’s past ended up “providing security” (Mookherjee 89).

Many raped women resorted to taking their lives, and those who wanted to carry on were forced, cajoled and went into prostitution. There were some who were promised a good life by the soldiers – they too chose either of the aforementioned paths – may be some dared to take justice into their own hands like Shyamali from the book (119), who loses her son after the war and goes to the Pakistani embassy to take revenge on officer Shahadat. She ends up killing a few men with a knife – she does not wait for the war trails that Tuki seems to wait for (impatiently to the extent of wanting another war so that she could summon a people’s court) many years after the independence.

A lot of women, like Mariam, fantasised about a “secure” future with a home, husband and children – Mariam, at least, initially starts her adult life with that dream. Even when she is captured and repeatedly raped, when she is in contact with Major Ishtiaque – she gets into a trance-like state where the major’s sweetness and sympathy sways her. Even though, he rapes her, beats her and pours whiskey on her genital – she imagines her life with him whenever he shows little kindness. She pictures herself in Shalimar gardens among the women of Lahore. This dream gets disrupted by the sudden appearance of the major’s wife in the form of a photograph and warning made to him to stay away from the enchantresses – the Bengali women.

Major Ishtiaque 2 or the major who looks like the first, abuses Mariam the same – at this point it seems all her abusers are alike to her. The way they behave or treat her somehow align – each instance makes Mariam parade naked (like she does while her is on her way to the camp from the abandoned house) to her past experiences. She lives in ghostlike phase when the memory of torture manifests on her body in reality with its resignification (Butler, 1993) – although here the “performative” act is caused by to the torturer – there is no arguing that the tortured is not voluntarily participating.

When Mariam meets Momtaj – a businessman – she accepts his hand in marriage. They move from meeting and having sex on the grass to the confines of Momtaj’s household. Mariam at this point, has no bodily pleasure left in her – or sex to her has now become synonymous to rape and vice versa. Momtaj pouring whiskey on her genital in their bedroom becomes Ishtiaque doing so at the camps. Thus recounting such memories, when Mukti interrupts the interviewees along with Mariam with questions about details, becomes difficult as the feeling during those events or the pain on the tortured are so similar that they can be interchangeable.

Trauma memory here is expressed as encoded not only in the body but also in social and everyday relations with objects and with the world around them, in which violence is folded away from sight. Fragmented imagery in the oral and visual accounts of the women shows the inadequacy of linear narrative theories in exploring experiences of violence. (Mookherjee 125)

Even Mariam reiterates the concept of the trick of memory with the rhetorical questions: “Can one explain all this? Is there a language to describe this experience? What language shall I use? (*The Search*, 89). This is why Elaine Scarry calls pain “unlike any other state of consciousness - has no referential content” (*The Body in Pain* 5).

Mariam’s ghostlike state comes in the way of their futile marriage – one which means having a place to live for Mariam. Momtaj resorts to drinking and their loveless sex turn into violent rape – where Mariam lies still. Momtaj slowly loses interest in her – which sets out another transition for Mariam. She goes back to her parents.

The word *birangona* bore the meaning of the “spoilt” one which, in turn, brought the image of rape by the enemies in mind. So the people around these women – both in the book and

in real life – called them war heroines but in actuality they were scorned upon. The very word which was supposedly established to honour these women brought them down and subjected them to unbearable slurs, stigma and hurtful insults. Their very presence (bodies) was a marker of what had happened to them – people did not regard the act as a crime but somehow criminalised the raped women of war, as though their bodies were the doer of the crime but not the bearer of unspeakable pain. Nayanika Mookherjee talks about women in Enayatpur and calls rape the “unspoken event” (89) which can be juxtaposed with Mariam’s situation:

However, the visual testimony of the raped women within the national commemorative frameworks transgressed the code of Enayatpur’s unspoken event. This transgression was exacerbated by the national honour accorded to the women as “war heroines” due to their tabooed virtue of being raped during the war. This contrasted violently with their landless, poor, anonymous, and subordinate status...The various forms of scorn highlight how inscription of idioms of secrecy provides an explanation of *khota* [insult] for villagers and influences the construction of varied subjectivities of women as victim, *muktihoodha* [freedom fighter], and *birangona*. (Mookherjee, 89)

Sumon, who is friends with both Abed Jahangir and Abed Samir, calls Mariam a “whore” – this indicates that people who know the truth about the *birangonas* blame them for what has happened to them. If it were not this way, the weight of such a heavy collective event that is “unspoken” would smoulder the perfection of “liberation”. The good boss at one of her offices makes her suck his penis in exchange of the “goodness” as opposed to the rude behaviour that Mariam faces prior to this – from her other employers who too knew about her being a *birangona*. Again, the conundrum of the meanings of this word makes us stop and ponder

whether (the late) Nilima Ibrahim (a member of Women's Rehabilitation Foundation, professor, former chairperson of Bangla Academy and former president of Bangladesh Mohila Samity) was right in her way of conducting research – her own secrecy – where she changed all the *birangonas*' identities – lest they were subjected to more violence. Of course, she was. No one can deny and argue that the *birangonas* were better off by themselves without people pestering them with tokens of honour, which invariably, brought doom. Their bodies which had always being an object of desire (to possess/conquer) and fear (to protect from dishonour) bore the testimony of that doom.

In an interview Nilima Ibrahim said:

I have written before that so many male freedom fighters were given different titles like '*beer bikram*' [valiant hero], '*beer sreshtho*' [most valiant hero], '*beer protik*' [idol of courage], whereas the female fighters were summarily dubbed as '*birangona*' [brave women], which later changed into *barangona* [prostitute]. So, does that mean that our women, like our mothers, wives and daughters, made no significant contribution to the war of independence in any way? (*Of the nation born* 2016)

This word and predicament is mentioned by Kushumkali (Anuradha alias Radharani's adopted sister at the red light district) – *barangona* marked the actual signification of the signified and signifier *birangona*. Those who were called "Ma" (mother) by the father of the nation, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, as a form of honour, and then titled *birangonas* were actually deemed as prostitutes by the society. That is why the word irks me personally, the equivocation

of the meaning feels like an unbearable boulder on the shoulder of those who still could not do anything for those women who had been wronged by war criminals and the public.

We find Mariam in her stupor and in her wordlessness many times in the book. As previously quoted, her memory of the camp days especially are blurred or not sharp enough for Mukti to get minute details about Mariam's clothes or where she was kept:

The failure to express pain - whether the failure to objectify its attributes or instead the failure, once those attributes are objectified, to refer them to their original site in the human body - will always work to allow its appropriation and conflation with debased forms of power; conversely, the successful expression of pain will always work to expose and make impossible that appropriation and conflation. (Scarry, 1987)

We find her, too many times, without a scope to express grief – it seems like she has little or no outlet for pain at times. Mariam's tears dry up within seconds of what society throws her way (when her mother comes to Rayer Bazar to live with her, she blames Mariam for their fate every now and then). The concatenation of trauma never seems to end however, how does Mariam react? Her reactions become more ghostlike by the days, years – as experienced by her body which clearly has an effect on her mental health. However, throughout the book, Mariam holds on to the idea of survival even when she loses everything and everyone. She moves on, finds alternative for survival when all doors are shut on her.

Mariam has been wronged by the society and people she loved from before the war. Her own family sent her to Dhaka merely because she held a boy's hand and was left stranded by him for three days. They did not take her back from the rehabilitation centre right away when they

heard about her, and when she went back her body became an object of fear that needed the security of marriage. Her own uncle wanted to use her for his benefit by getting her married to her autistic son – just so that no one questions his complicity with the Pakistanis. No one seems to care about the so-called *birangonas* as Mariam says, as Nilima Ibrahim reiterates.

Too many details from the book match with the horrible details of the research done on the *birangonas*. To back to Nilima Ibrahim's interview – it is where she talks about the adoption, and abortion of the war babies – how many were sent abroad and how younger mothers didn't want to abort nor give up their babies. She talks about the activities of the *biragonas*, the clinic for doing abortion surgeries, the chicken poultry at the Mirpur centre, the red light districts, the prostitutes, the suicides, and our failure to give the women basic respect.

Shaheen Akhtar weaves together a complicated picture or episode of the Liberation War that bears many narratives and fragments of conflict. The stories of *birangonas* would have otherwise faded in the pages of history and our collective memory had it not been for books like *Talaash*. The nation's collective amnesia towards this topic is another burden that needs to be more talked about. Thanks to historical fiction and important work like this, we can hold on to the horrible reality that is a big part of the making of our country. The horrible reality which was supposed to be a winning weapon for West Pakistan against us – the horrible reality of subjugating the women's bodies as tool of war and putting into political narrative – the horrible reality of lack of women's rights even if our predecessors (the women of war/violated bodies of war) have suffered so much! Through Mukti, she helps us trace back in time and see the circumstances of the women of war were in and what led them to become *birangonas* – no, not war heroines – but bearer of atrocities and horrific circumstances both physical and mental –

whose bodies stood parallel to making of the nation: “What is quite literally at stake in the body in pain is the making and unmaking of the world” (Scarry 23).

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Conclusion

I do not know how far I was able to delineate the areas I wanted to explore in this paper. Although, I am glad I chose this topic which is why I could read and research about it even more. It was extremely difficult to cope with the kind of minute details of pain that I came across in *Talaash*. As though, Mariam's frustrations and suffering were too close to home – something I can only understand in theory but can never feel. There are instances in all three stories that women everywhere can relate to. The female body is an object of scrutiny, wonder, and fear – it is site of possible harm that can be done any time by patriarchal tools – of war and every day.

Mariam, Annette and Ayah are not real – but their essence is crafted from real life experiences of women – whose bodies have been violated in the name of politics, and in the name of imposing power. The duplication or repetition of such violence makes the sites (bodies in pain) ghostlike but the violence is never okay.

The desperation of the stigma around rape or sexual violence make women to keep quiet or resort to secrecy but there some Annettes in the world would like to send the end of it. The survivors – Ayahs and Mariams – are who give us hope and teach us a lesson that opposition can be simply survival.