

Ethical Issues Concerning Representation of Narratives of Sexual Violence of 1971¹

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‘The exclusion of individual interpretations and social context in human rights modes of employment has worked its way through the process whereby life becomes text becomes genre and has transformed survivor’s own interpretation (in public, at least) of human rights abuses. This relationship between facts and interpretation and representation conveys the conditions under which knowledge is constructed and represented’ Wilson (1997:146)³.

The aforementioned relationship between facts, interpretation and representation is of significant importance when historical silences are being renarrativised after having surfaced or being ‘retrieved’ from the cracks and interstices of the national project where they have been consigned to, for decades. This becomes a particularly pertinent issue in the case of representing histories of sexual violence of *Muktijuddho*, (Liberation War of Bangladesh, 1971) whose articulation, discovery and excavations have been a predominant feature in the 1990s in Bangladesh. This paper based on my fieldwork in Bangladesh on the histories of sexual violence of 1971 undertaken between 1997-1998 and between 2002-2003, attempts to point out the **ethical considerations** in representing the voices of women who are survivors of that violent history of 1971 and particularly in the context of the website: www.drishtipat.org’s campaign for these women. It also attempts to map out the context within which the renarrativisation of accounts of sexual violence of 1971 emerged in Bangladesh in the 1990s and among various other narratives highlights one such survivor, Champa’s, ‘story’. This paper explores the processes through which history of rape during 1971 and *birangonas* are being remembered and their

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³ Wilson, R ed. 1997. *Human Rights, Culture and Context: Anthropological Perspectives*. London: Pluto Press.

experiences are transformed into narratives. This would hence enable a reconceptualisation of oral history as a methodological tool for representation of such narratives.

The historical trajectory of Bangladesh, within which the history of sexual violence is articulated, is a witness to varied ruptured pasts, multilayered negotiation of one's identity. Thus there exists today a festering, unreconciled history, with the memory and the wound still raw, open and unhealed. Following Tonkin (1989:1)⁴ it is important to ask how did the past lead to the present, how does the present create the past? Clearly memory addresses the present in its recovery of the past. Tonkin (1992)⁵ argues, that the past is not only a resource to deploy, to support a case or assert a social claim, it also enters memory in different ways and helps to structure it. Following Tonkin (1989, 1992), Antze and Lambek, (1996)⁶ I argue that the various dynamics of identity construction influence not only what of 1971 is remembered, but also how it is recalled, transmitted to others, embedded in national culture and history? Which past gains hegemony and what are the processes by which this competition for a privileged past occurs?

Histories of Rape after 1971:

In 1972, the Bangladeshi state adopted a policy to accord a new visibility to the 200,000 women raped during *Muktijuddho* by eulogising them as *birangonas* (war heroines), which coincided with a new genre of public persuasive rhetoric and was an attempt to reinstate them in marriage and reduce social ostracism. A Relief and Rehabilitation Board was set up by the government in Bangladesh for the purpose of setting up Rehabilitation Centres throughout the country in order to provide relief and rehabilitation, set up abortion clinics, marry the women off, provide vocational

⁴ Tonkin, E., M. McDonald and M. Chapman. ed. 1989. *History and Ethnicity*, ASA Monograph 27. London and New York: Routledge.

⁵ Tonkin, E. 1992. *Narrating our Past: The Social Construction of Oral History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

⁶ Antze, P. and M. Lambek 1996. eds. *Tense Past: Cultural Essays in Trauma and Memory*. London: Routledge.

training to ‘war-affected’ women i.e. primarily women who have been raped during the war.

The issue of rape during the war was reported in the press after 1971, till mid 1973 after which the *birangonas* received a token mention in the State speeches as the ‘200,000 mothers and sisters’. After 1975 the *birangonas* disappeared from the State discourse, though remaining a literary, cultural and cinematic focus through the 70s to the 90s. The re-emergence of the history of sexual violence in the public discourse occurred with the front-page press (*Bhorer Kagoj* 27/3/92; *Doinik Jonokontho* 28/3/92) photograph of three *birangonas* at *Gono Adalat* (People's Tribunal), a movement held on 26th March 1992 which was attempting to try Gholam Azum, a leading *Razakar* (generic term for collaborators with the Pakistani army in 1971) who had been reinstated in the political-scape of Bangladesh. In the *Gono Adalat* various testimonies of affected individuals i.e. those who had lost their father, brother or son were narrated. These narratives were juxtaposed with the ‘testimonial’ presence of the aforementioned three women (among whom I primarily did my fieldwork) who had been raped during the war.

Historicising rape in the 1990s:

Since 1992, accounts of the history of sexual violation have re-emerged in the public discourse. Nationally the, reinstatement of collaborators and the lack of bringing to trial those *Razakars* who are implicated in the killings of intellectuals during the war, rise of *fatwas*, international reference to *Muktijuddho* (occurring at the conjuncture of Cold War politics) as a civil war in the international legal language of human rights⁷, or Indo- Pakistani war,⁸ the need for the history of the war to be transmitted to the *projonmo* (younger generations) and hence the lack of acknowledgement of its genocidal birth represented the unresolved, unreconciled history of the nation. To the call for trial of collaborators was added the need to establish a War Crimes tribunal where the *Razakars* could be tried and the demand for

⁷ As cited in the International Commission of Jurists, 1972. *The Events of East Pakistan, 1971: A Legal Study*. Geneva: Page 27.

⁸ A search for *Muktijuddho* on the Internet showed 45 sites while a search for 1971 Indo-Pakistan War provided links to 3323 sites. A few examples of such sites are: www.subcontinent.com/1971war; www.kids.infoplease.com/ce6/history; www.lycos.infoplease.com/ce6/history; www.freeindian.org/1971war; www.bharat-rakshak.com/IAF/History/1971war; www.asia.yahoo.com/arts/humanities/history; www.historyguy.com/indo-pakistaniwars.html.

an apology from Pakistan was raised. The documentary ‘War Crimes File’ made in 1993 in London traced the war crimes committed by three collaborators who were based in London’s East End and added further fuel to the fire. Internationally, the Declaration of rape as a war crime in the Beijing session in 1995, followed by events of apology by the Japanese Government to the Comfort women, developments around Bosnia, Rwanda, the setting up of the International War Crimes Tribunal spoke profoundly to the Bangladesh situation. Above all the publication of the two volumes of Nilima Ibrahim’s *Ami Birangona Bolchi* (This is the War Heroine Speaking) in 1994 and 1995⁹ provided personalised accounts of sexual violation of eight women with whom the author had been in close contact when she worked in the Women’s Rehabilitation Centre in 1972.

The need to document histories of sexual violation had already arisen from 1992 with the picture of the three women in *Gono Adalat*. From the ‘statistical anonymity’ of 200,000 war heroines, this provided the image of a ‘realistic, evidentiary, authentic’ *birangona*--this realistic vein would be followed in the subsequent oral histories through which narratives of rape of

1971 has been documented in Bangladesh. True to this realist, testimonial genre one would find frequent presence of portraits of ‘newly discovered’ war-heroines in newspapers in the 1990s along with their narrative of experience of sexual violence of 1971 particularly during the months of commemoration of the war in December and March (See **illus. 1**).



The methodological use of oral history is also an attempt to highlight a subaltern historiography whereby the voices of unknown, grassroots *birangonas* and *Muktijoddhas* may be given their due place in the history of *Muktijuddho*. Various

Illus. 1. Heading: *Birangona Rizia* is leading a life of poverty. (*Doinik Songbad* 16/3/97).

⁹Ibrahim, N. 1994, 1995. *Ami Birangona Bolchi*. (This is the *Birangona* Speaking) (Volume 1 and 2). Dhaka: Jagriti.

important ethnographies have taken recourse to oral history (Butalia 1998; Menon and Bhasin 1998)¹⁰ as well as the experiences of survivors ‘to provide a corrective to the understanding of history as an exclusively specialist activity’ (Das 1990:307; 1995)¹¹; and furthermore, to provide a ‘profound understanding of the experience of historical events and that their meaning can never be settled’ (Menon and Bhasin 1998:18); and finally to provide ‘a common context of struggle....as resistance is encoded in the practices of remembering and writing’ since ‘as women of Palestine, Algeria remember wars, they figure their agency’ (Mohanty 1991:7, 38)¹². In fact, oral history and testimony enables ‘a documentation of both the witness as he makes testimony and the understanding and meaning of events generated in the activity of testimony itself’ (Young 1988:157-71)¹³. However it is the exposition of the framework of exchange between the narrator and the interviewer and the conditions under which the testimony is produced can alone provide a ethical and subjective-objective understanding of the narrative.

In the following section I explore the narrative of Champa--a woman who has survived the experience of sexual violence during 1971, the press reports about her and the discourse of narrativisation that lies therein.

¹⁰ Butalia, U. 1998. *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India*. New Delhi: Viking Penguin India; Menon, R. and K. Bhasin, 1998. *Borders and Boundaries: Women in India's Partition*. Kali for Women: New Delhi.

¹¹ Das, V. ed. 1990. *Mirrors of Violence: Community, Riots and Survivors in South Asia*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press; Das, V. 1995. *Critical Events: An Anthropological Perspective on Contemporary India*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.

¹² Mohanty, C. T. 1991. ‘Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses’ in C. T. Mohanty, A. Russo and L. Torres eds. *Third World Women and The Role of Feminism*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.



Telling Champa’s ‘Story’:

I came to know about Champa from a newspaper article in *Bhorer Kagoj* (13/5/98) with the headline ‘*Birangona Champa in the Mental Hospital*’ with a picture of a woman who seemed to be in her mid 40s (see *illus. 2*).

Illus 2: Above: Heading: *Birangona Champa in Mental Hospital (Bhorer Kagoj 13/5/98)*.

The report in the article follows:

“By losing her chastity for the sake of Liberation, Champa has lead a life of imprisonment for the last two decades in the Pabna Mental Hospital. In the midst of the chaos of the war in 1971, 13-year-old Champa strayed off and lost her parents. When she was searching for everyone, then the Pakistani army took her to a camp. There along with a few other imprisoned women Champa was subjected to brutal torture (i.e. rape) by the Pakistani soldiers. After being raped continuously she lost her mental stability. At the end of September 1971, the liberation fighters took over the camp and freed the imprisoned *birangonas*. Champa bearing the marks of rape on her body was then unconscious. After independence Champa was under medical treatment for two years in the Women’s Rehabilitation Centre in Dhaka. Since this treatment did not cure her, the matron of the Rehabilitation Centre Meera Choudhuri admitted Champa in the Pabna Mental Hospital.

In the Register of the hospital, the date of admission of Champa is 22nd October 1972. Diagnosed as schizophrenic, Champa was cured within six months. It was also written in the hospital register that most probably the Pakistani army raped her. Letters were sent many times to her father Abdul Gani, resident of Barisal so as to ask him to take her back to her family. Having received no reply from him, the hospital authorities gave up any chance of returning Champa back her family. In all these years since she has been cured, Champa has been working as an attendant of the patients in the hospital. Champa also reminiscences of her childhood and memories of her family are still vivid. When the journalist writing the report asked about her imprisoned life in the Pakistani camp her eyes brimmed with tears and she said she would not say anything. Though Champa had expressed that she wanted to spend rest of her life in the Mental hospital, at the end of the interview with the journalist she pleaded that she wanted to spend the last few days of her life among normal people. Hence she continuously reiterated that she knew needlework, and would be able to do other jobs-she pleaded that arrangements be made to free her. The article continued that a few

¹³ Young, J. F. 1988. *Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust: Narrative and Consequences of Interpretation*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

attempts have already been made to free Champa into a normal life. The lawyer Eleena Khan from *Manobadhikar Bastobayon Songshtha* (MBS from now on meaning Organisation for the Realisation of Human Rights) had visited Champa and has taken measures to bring Champa to Dhaka. For two decades, by suppressing her pain, Champa has spent her days in the Pabna Mental Hospital.”

Another article was written in *Bhorer Kagoj* on 16th June 1998, after she had already been brought to Dhaka by MBS. The article was accompanied with a picture of Champa looking sideways, her face expressing discomfort with her situation. The article emphasised in its report:

“After twenty six years Champa came out of the Mental Hospital and hence MBS, the Human Rights organisation provided Champa the opportunity to experience the light and air under the open sky for the first time after 26 years. Describing Champa the article stated that even though she was healthy and physically capable of working she looked otherwise. Having worked with mental patients, Champa’s psychological growth has not taken place. Even though she is apparently healthy, it would seem she is ill. She does not speak much; even if she speaks her words get entangled. It also narrated how Champa had suddenly decided to stay in the hospital and declined to go to Dhaka when the members of MBS came to take her. She agreed to go finally on the assurance that she would be allowed to come back to the Hospital if she did not like being in Dhaka.”

I met Champa on 1st June 1998 around two weeks after the first article was written and in the duration between the publications of the two articles. The Pabna Mental Hospital is one of the main mental asylum in Bangladesh and in recent years the press has critically reported about its appalling facilities and infrastructure, its laying off of staffs and dismissal of patients who were not totally cured. The hospital on the other hand claimed that this was due to lack of allotment of State funds towards its operation. Located on the outskirts of Pabna town, the very organisation of architecture and space of the mental hospital seemed to render a sense of distance and peripherality. Before I came across the main building of the Hospital, I travelled through the bare hospital grounds in a rickshaw for twenty minutes. The surroundings seemed to be stripped of any vegetation or traffic of vehicles or individuals. On reaching the hospital, the Director of the hospital introduced me to a Matron and the latter asked me to wait in an annex room for Champa. She refused to meet me initially as she thought that I was somebody from Dhaka and came into the room muttering that she would not leave and does not want to leave. When I told her that I had come

to just talk to her and not take her to Dhaka she was reassured and even wanted to show me around the wards and meet some of the patients who were her friends.

She spoke clearly and articulately and said she does not know how she ended up in the mental hospital and remembers of her times in the village as a young girl and has blurred memories of the beginning of *gondogol* (chaos meaning the war of 1971). But she said she has no recollection of the year of the war. She said that many people had asked her about the year of the war, but she has not been able to remember anything. She reiterated that either she wants to return to her family in the village or she wants to continue working in the Mental Hospital. Rather than stitching clothes, doing craftwork or looking after other people's children in Dhaka, she emphasised that she would rather continue working in the hospital and not go away to an unfamiliar environment in Dhaka away from all the people she had to come to know. She reiterated that the mental hospital had become her home, she had friends here and people cared for her there.

Coincidentally I also met the journalist who wrote the article when I was in Pabna. He confirmed he had not given an accurate' account of Champa's narrative, had not met her and his report was based on accounts given by MBS.

Reading Champa's 'Story':

It is important to explore the disjunctions between Champa's narrative as accounted to me and the narrativisation in the article in the press. Some minute yet significant contradictions would draw our attention to the discursive nature of the description of sexual violation during the war. In the breadth of the same article is mentioned that Champa was under medical treatment for two years in the Women's Rehabilitation Centre in Dhaka which was established only in February 1972 after which she is admitted to the Mental Hospital which is contradicted by the fact that in the Register of the hospital, the date of admission of Champa is 22nd October 1972.

Also the notion of probability as recorded in the register that Champa might have been raped by the Pakistani army is followed up in the article in contradiction of the facts it 'excavates' by mentioning on one hand Champa's denial to narrate the accounts of 1971 as she does not remember anything of 1971, which on the other hand is preceded by a detailed account of sexual violence. Instead of exploring Champa's

'blank-out' of the events of 1971, which might provide comprehension of how memories are contained through the acts of forgetting, or what function acts of forgetting may encode, the reader is instead given a clean, gory description of sexual violation in Pakistani army camps. I must hastily add that I draw attention to these minute disjunctions to explore the assumptions that might have influenced the narrativisation of Champa's 'story' on the part of the journalist. The assumptions at play here seem that Champa's narrative embodies evidence of a 'hidden' history whereby the journalist can archaeologically unearth, excavate her experience of rape in her denial. The objective thereby becomes the need to stage a vision of an authentic oppressed, violated woman. Thus the horrifying genre adopted in the description of sexual violence precisely links Champa with 'marks' that characterise her and make her a 'case'.

Champa's relentless reiteration that she wants to go back to the village or continue working in the hospital and not go to Dhaka and the authorities lack of engagement with her wishes should be comprehended in the context of the hospital's lack of funds, attempts to layoff staff and dismiss patients. Hence it would seem ideal to channelise Champa's labour productively and thereby engage her in some work like looking after children in nurseries etc. in Dhaka under the aegis of MBS.

Further the horrifying genre is re-emphasised by the connotation of the institution of mental hospital within which Champa has led a life of 'imprisonment' for the last 26 years. Hence the influence of having spent all these years in the mental hospital is apparent to the journalists and the readers from the fact that 'she looks ill, does not speak, her words are entangled when she speaks.' These observations made when Champa is taken to Dhaka, seems to me to reflect her bewilderment and alienation in being uprooted from her familiar surroundings in the Mental Hospital after all these years. But this enables the article to chart a traumatic trajectory for Champa by emphasising the 'oppressive' connotation of a mental hospital and as a result to get away from its 'abnormality' the article reiterates that Champa 'wanted to spend the last few days of her life among normal people'. The stress on the 'imprisoned' conditions of the Mental Hospital enables the article to strongly legitimise the moment of rape by mapping out the consequences of traumatic trajectory from that 'critical event' (Das 1995) through the subsequent two decades.

The double horrifying genre of sexual violence by the Pakistani army and its consequential life spent in an 'oppressive' institution precisely provides the accountability factor necessary for identifying rape as a war crime globally for Bangladesh. It also enables the location of causality of the second horrifying genre in the first along with an emphasis on her dislocation from her family i.e. since Champa was raped by the Pakistani army, she was not taken back into her family and hence spent an oppressive life in a Mental Hospital.

A life lived in 'oblivion and suppression' needs to be resurrected. The need for MBS is to free her from the miseries of a mental institution and hence naturally free and liberate her from her trauma. This would thereby 'give her life a breath of air and ray of light'. Infact the moment when MBS takes her out of the hospital is reported in the article as: "Last Sunday, at 12.30pm after 26 years, Champa enjoyed the free air and light of the outside world." It is important to note here that a year ago it was this newspaper, which had brought out Champa's 'story' and narrated how she had nowhere to go whereby MBS had taken up Champa's case. Thus through the reportage of Champa's case and the role of MBS we find what Veena Das (1995) has referred to as 'the professional organisation of knowledge' whereby personal narratives gain credibility from the saviour paradigm inherent in an authoritative body of knowledge, here of that of journalism and human rights.

Champa was brought over to Dhaka in June 1998 and attempts by the author to meet her in Dhaka then was impeded by various commitments on the author's part and also by the terrible floods that occurred in 1998. In the brief fieldwork between 2002-2003, the author enquired about Champa with MBS and was informed that she is working in Dhaka as an *ayah* looking after other people's children, a job which Champa had specifically said she did not want to do.

Conclusion

The politics of remembrance here is based on an assumed impact of that of sexual violence, the consequential trauma and a necessary traumatised post-event trajectory of life story, in this case being 'imprisoned' in an 'oppressive' mental hospital. Thus the genre of oral history seeks to fit fragments from subaltern voices into a totalising mould whose multiple voices however resist such imposition (Samaddar 1997:21)¹⁴. In this what is lost is Champa's wish to continue living in a so called oppressive institution like the Mental Hospital which she feels is her home and does not wish to be 'rescued' from there. The expert discourses of human rights law and journalism subjugates and immobilizes Champa in the very act of recognizing her 'suffering' and dislocating her from her familiar 'oppressive' environment. Here the reinscription of personal stories into national and international domain obscures the richness and moral complexities of Champa's account and her experience of dealing with sexual violence.

This paper should not be read as a negation of the violence of sexual violence of 1971. It is a pointer to move beyond that and that representation of the narratives of sexual violence should reflect first and foremost the desires and wishes of the women whose narratives are being highlighted instead of a macro, national objective. Otherwise a disjunction would arise between this macro narrative and the personal lives embodied by the narratives, which are being given a place within this macro narrative. This is one of the ethical dilemmas of the research in question. I have attempted to resolve this by straddling two boats: remembering Spivak's (1988)¹⁵ cautions that research and representation are irreducibly intertwined with politics, power and privilege; and Taussig's (1987)¹⁶ challenge to anthropologists to be self-critical of their historical and contextual positions, and to speak out against the injustices they encounter in their research 'habitus'.

¹⁴ Samaddar, R. 1997. *On Problems of Writing a Comprehensive History of the Bangladesh Liberation War*. Calcutta: Azad Institute Paper No. 6.

¹⁵ Spivak, G. C. 1993. 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' in Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman eds. *Colonial Discourse and Postcolonial Theory Reader*. Hemel Hempstead: Harvester.

¹⁶ Taussig, M. 1987. *Shamanism, Colonialism and the Wild Man: A Study in Terror and Healing*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.

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