

Do we really remember?

THE SOUND & THE FURY



SUSHMITA
S. PREETHA

MEMORIES are mysterious things; collective memories even more so. What else explains the amnesia among a certain group of people in this country regarding the role of the collaborators in the Liberation War of 1971? How can the murderer of Shahid Jahanara Imam's

son Rumi suddenly become a "political opponent" unjustly tried? How can the role of Jamaat in '71 be renounced, when the lives and deaths of so many Bangladeshis are integrally tied to their atrocities back then? On the other hand, how can the same people who fought for justice and democracy in '71 now sit and watch complacently as the core values of our Liberation War are made a mockery of? How can they forget that "Muktijuddher Chetona" is something bigger than reductive "Fashi Chai" slogans in Shahbagh, that it is about the liberation of the masses, not just from the Pakistanis, but from oppression of all kinds?

What happened in the last 44 years that so many of us remember the war differently?

We need to make an attempt to understand the complex processes through which individual and collective memories come to be created, sustained and reconfigured within specific socio-historical and political conditions. Our memories are dependent on the interpretive and communication frameworks of a given society at a particular point in time. This means that the social – and by extension, the political, the economic and the ideological – is always already present even within our most intimate of memories. Since these structures are never stable, and always in a state of flux, it would be more appropriate to think of memories as "reconstructions" rather than "recollections".

Therefore, how we remember the Liberation War is conditioned, among others, by our social location (i.e. our class, gender, ethnicity, etc.), an exclusive nationalist historiography that focuses on the sacrifices of some elite leaders meanwhile erasing the contributions of countless subaltern others, and successive regimes of authoritarian and so-called democratic rule that tried to renounce the atrocities of the war and absolve war criminals of their sins. Since independence, countless attempts have been made by different quarters – and not just by anti-liberation forces either! – to rewrite history, to establish propaganda as facts, to rewire memories themselves, so that we would look back without truly remembering. We have been taught contradictory versions of history that are outright lies at worst and simplistic at best, to the extent that we now either disavow the atrocities of the Liberation War or use "Muktijuddher Chetona" as a pretext for justifying repressive measures and silencing dissent, making a shameless travesty of the spirit and sacrifices of liberation.

Within three decades, in front of our very eyes, from pariahs, the Jamaat-e-Islami went on to

occupy powerful positions in the very sovereign Bangladesh they had so vehemently rejected, their leaders even rising to the rank of cabinet ministers and given two of the most important ministries during the BNP regime. They solidified their hold over the country's politics to such an extent that they could claim publicly and cockily that "No war crimes were committed" in '71 or that "In fact, anti-liberation forces never even existed." There was public outcry, sure, but the damage was done: seeds of doubt in the nation's flailing collective memory had been planted. The war over history was well underway, entangled with an equally contentious struggle over whether we are Bengalis or Muslims first. Jamaat managed to convince a considerable segment of the population that they were, in fact, guardians

or an atheist: the choice was yours. Forget that socialism was as much a "Muktijuddher Chetona" as the establishment of secularism; forget that the rallying cry of '71 was for peace, justice and democracy; today, liberation must be remembered, but only on sterilised terms. It is most unfortunate that rather than encourage us to take part in a process of remembering that is holistic, not selective, the ruling party has fostered the "Us vs Them" mentality, taking advantage of people's powerful sentiments on 1971, to the effect that any who critique it can now be demeaned, dismissed and denigrated with a simple yet powerful declaration: "You're a *rajabakar*." An inevitable byproduct of throwing around the term "*rajabakar*" indiscriminately is that it slowly

the Archive (which, mind you, is not a physical, tangible place) so that they may never be recalled. However, on a broader sense, the very act of conservation and memory – the choice of particular artifacts in a museum, for instance or what stories we researchers want to tell and how—requires that certain memories be prioritised and others forgotten.

What happens when erasure is so successful that we never know the memory existed in the first place, when we forget what it is that we have forgotten? The Archive as we know is full of such voids. How do we learn to look for the traces of these voids when the mechanisms of repression have taught us to look away? What new symbolic and political frameworks might allow us to bring into vision memories hitherto silenced? How



ILLUSTRATION: MANAN MORSHED

of our religion rather than the criminals that some "progressive/seculars/atheists" would have them believe. It didn't help that the Seculars were rigid and exclusive in their discourse – it served to alienate a populace which, though moderate, still held religion above anything else.

Perhaps as a reaction to this diabolical attempt to disavow the memories of the Liberation War, we witnessed over the years the solidification of a rather inflexible pro-1971 force, one that increasingly felt the need to establish one unified memory of liberation, one official narrative that was beyond reproach. Any narratives that did not fit in with the streamlined memory of 1971 had to be ignored, silenced, disparaged even; it was "us" or "them", after all; whatever little space there was for nuance all but disappeared with the Shahbagh movement. You were a *rajabakar*

loses its historical significance and allows real collaborators, whose war crimes are well documented, to hide behind the excuse that the ruling party is out to persecute and prosecute its opponents.

On a theoretical level, all narratives of the past involve silences and forgetting. These silences can be self-imposed, consciously or unconsciously. After all, memories and identities are constituted mutually and entail certain compromises. To establish some boundaries of belonging (be it national, political, religious), we tend to selectively register certain signposts and markers to solidify our identification with some groups and distance ourselves from others.

The erasures or silences can be also imposed by authoritarian regimes, oppressive social structures, nationalist movements, or neoliberal institutions that want to get rid of evidence in

might we begin a process of remembrance, of healing the wounds of the past, of finding a way that does not reproduce inequality and injustice through our living memory?

"Remembering," wrote anti-colonial writer, Jacqui Alexander, "is different from looking back. We can look back sideways and not bring things into full view. We can look back at some past perceived to be wholly retrievable in the present, or some mirage of it, a gesture of nostalgia that can give rise to fascisms of different kinds."

Sadly, we as a people are no longer encouraged to remember. But if we really want to bring peace to the dead, to do justice to the sacrifices of '71, we must do more than simply follow the crowd. We must remember to remember differently.

The writer is an activist and journalist.

"MAN UP"

SAAD ADNAN KHAN

SOCIOLOGIST Michael S Kimmel in his essay titled *Masculinity as homophobia* writes, "In one survey, women and men were asked what they were most afraid of. Women responded that they were most afraid of being raped and murdered. Men responded that they were most afraid of being laughed at." Kimmel writes this in US context, but it can be beneficial to see how such a reality applies to other contexts too. Shame is detrimental to the masculine image, for which men look for acknowledgement from other men. In relation to shame, Dr. Parveen Akter, team leader, Youth Friendly Services (YFS) team, UBR Bangladesh Alliance, says, "While talking to young people for need assessment in different parts of Bangladesh, we have come across adolescent boys who expressed concern about the size of their genitals. They think that the smaller the size the less they will be able to satisfy their girlfriend or wife. Many get these ideas by watching porn." These preoccupations with size become a great concern for boys and men, mainly because their status as a masculine man depends on that. One only has to go through the tiny leaflets distributed for free on the streets of Dhaka that over-enthusiastically provide

information about how to enhance genital size or increase sexual stamina with the use of oil and medication. This shows how sex and body are determined and constructed by society as well and how sexual assertiveness and dominance is seen as an integral part of masculinity.

Feminist Kamla Bhasin writes, "An excessive valorisation of virility, for example, can have a disastrous impact on men. Maleness here is equated with sexual performance, which in turn is equated with power, power over women, and other men. A man who cannot perform sexually is called 'impotent', considered weak, powerless, non-male. According to this yardstick, a man's power/potency is located in his sexual organ. Impotence in a man is not just a shortcoming, it's a disgrace." To prove one's own sexual assertiveness, men might not even respect consent when it comes to engaging in different kinds of sexual activities. It is often believed that rapists cannot control their sexual urge, for which women should dress in a moderate way, so that men are not 'tempted'. However, such a claim is nonsensical, because men are not rapists by nature. Men are encouraged to act in a 'manly' way, through which violence becomes an entitlement and normalised part of the masculine identity.

The development sector's initiative of eliminat-

ing violence against women has largely revolved around the idea of creating 'role models' and examples of 'good' men. Engaging men in household chores and bringing up the child, and encouraging men to not sexually harass women on the street, is believed to bring gender equality on the basis of such initiatives being the barometer of a man's 'goodness'. However, working around masculinity yet again in the framework of women's empowerment, and the binary of good and bad is not only apolitical, but also limiting, because such an approach does not explore power and neither does it politicise gender by reading it in mediation with other power differentials such as class, sexuality, nationality, dis/ability, religion, etc. We have to get rid of the rubric of the 'good' and 'bad' man once and for all, and really understand how power functions, and what relationships we have or do not have with power.

In the context of masculinity and power, it is also important to ask how men counter and negate social expectations and *not* stick to norms—for example, men who exhibit culturally 'subordinate masculinities' such as gay men, men who are subjected to the power of other men due to societal power structures based on ethnicity and/or class—the dents and tensions they create when they emerge with alternative

visions of being a man and transform normative ideals of masculinity altogether.

Through a project on masculinity that I conducted with my friend, a photojournalist, we interviewed men about what it means to be a 'man' and took their pictures. We tried allocating different expressions of masculinity through these narratives and visuals. We wanted to address the larger questions of violence and unjust relations men exhibit with men, and see how that spills out to affect other community members. This is an attempt to bring in narratives from different intersectional positions of community members, and see how these narratives can shape how we look at men and understand masculinity.

As activists, we need to find answers, raise questions and strategise in much more creative ways than we have done before. By exploring how our position in society influences our action, thinking and gender expression, and by mapping out disparate narratives, we should try and understand how to create deeper and meaningful ways of communicating and connecting. These are critical concerns we should think about in the context of gender based violence and injustice.

The writer is a researcher.

Men are encouraged to act in a 'manly' way, through which violence becomes an entitlement and normalised part of the masculine identity.

QUOTABLE Quote

The cost of liberty is less than the price of repression.

W. E. B. DU BOIS

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

CROSS

1 "Shoot!"

7 Hold tightly

11 Middle East language

12 Bulldog's school

13 Sociable diner

15 Computer symbols

16 Canary's home

18 Ride the waves

21 Jot down

22 Autobiography

24 Commotion

25 Touch lightly

26 Brewed beverage

27 Repressed, as rage

29 Succotash half

30 Glade grazer

31 Indiana city

32 Get smart

34 Rec room game

40 Land unit

41 "Becket" actor

42 Still life fruit

43 Baseball's Mickey

DOWN

1 Night flier

2 Important time

3 Yak it up

4 Compel

5 Brother's daughter

6 Cave sound

7 Drywall mineral

8 Kanye's music

9 -- de France

10 For each

14 Beginning

16 Like secret messages

17 Make amends

19 Copter part

20 Blazing

21 Snooze

22 Guidebook feature

23 Sprinted

25 Blender button

28 Bank worker

29 Civil War weapon

31 Filmom's Garbo

33 Physics bit

34 Spigot

35 Tennis feat

36 Lingerie item

37 Negating word

38 Under the weather

39 Climpse

YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

C	O	P	S	E	M	A	G	I	C
S	P	A	W	N	A	L	O	N	E
A	T	S	E	A	Y	E	N	T	L
S	C	A	T	T	E	R	S		
H	A	R	P	T	Y	A	W	N	E
E	N	T	E	R	L	E	A	V	E
A	S	S	A	I	L	E	V	E	N
B	A	T	E	X	E	C			
A	L	I	E	N	M	O	V	E	R
C	A	R	V	E	P	R	I	M	O
K	N	E	E	D	O	N	C	U	E

BEETLE BAILEY

by Mort Walker

BABY BLUES

by Kirkman & Scott