

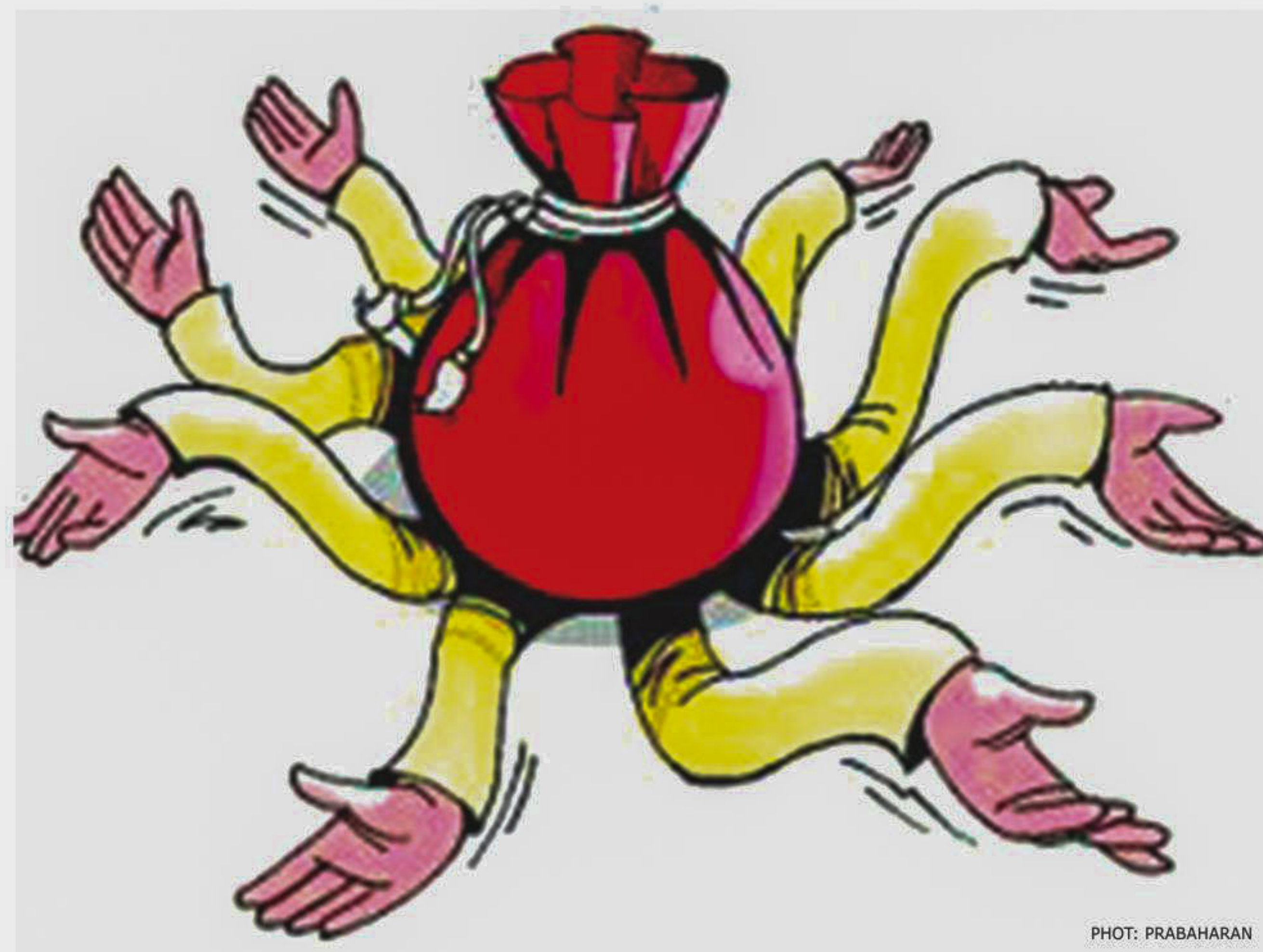
Whose fault is it anyway?

MOYUKH MAHTAB

ONE would assume that a job entails its holder to carry out his responsibilities ethically and with sincerity, especially when it comes to providing a public service. Not so, judging from the comments of the director general of the passport department, on the recently published TIB National Household Survey Report. "After taking charge this year, I have motivated my officials who are working hard day and night to serve people. If the TIB now says the passport office is the most corrupt, how will these officials continue to provide services?" he said.

Does he mean that now that the findings of TIB's survey have been published, passport office officials can no longer work? The finger-in-ear denials following the publication of the survey imply that TIB is engaging in malicious slander, that the reputation of the passport office was tarnished overnight. But who among us have not experienced the reality: waiting in line for hours, lack of co-operation from the officials, the harassments, the negligence, the intermediaries, and the delays. Of course, all those can be avoided if you are willing to spend a little more or have acquaintances on the inside.

"The Corruption in Service Sectors: National Household Survey 2015" indicates that the highest percentage of households responded that they had to face some form of corruption from the passport offices. The director general protested saying that the survey gives a picture of the previous year and that the TIB officials had not visited the passport office before publishing the report. It seems he has some misunderstanding about what a household sur-



PHOT: PRABAHARAN

vey entails. When 77.7 percent of the 15,446 households surveyed from across the country, between November and December, claim to have been victims of corruption, it seems odd that the director general can so easily disregard such complaints. The TIB report says that the survey, "is expected to assist in taking forward the anti-corruption commitments and activities of the

ruling party and their alliances. Besides, the findings of this survey will assist in taking appropriate measures according to the nature of corruption in different service sectors."

Instead we see vehement denials. The number of reports by major newspapers and TV channels over the years clearly highlight the extent of corruption in the passport office. And the survey does give a picture of what the

citizens feel towards it. This could have been taken as an indicator of how to go about the reforms required by the new director general. But that might be too much to ask—when his officials can no longer "provide service."

I take only one example out of the TIB survey report, but this is representative of many service providing offices and officials. It is not even surprising at this point to hear that after passport,

the highest percentage of corruption were in the law enforcement and education sectors.

On a cursory read, the TIB report seems to be fair in its representation: "corruption has decreased in land administration, judicial services" while it "increased in local government, electricity and insurance." Given the data represents a big cross-section of the population, from 64 districts and the Dhaka and Chittagong City Corporations, it certainly seems like a good indicator of which areas the administration might need to focus on to ease and erase the corruption faced by the people. Yet, like countless incidents before, there's only denial, not that it is convincing any one.

At this point, it seems almost naïve to ask, whether there's any intention of tackling corruption at all. Reports and surveys may be prepared, but what good are those, if one refuses to even acknowledge the corroding problem that the findings unveil?

To be fair, I have not been to the passport office since the new director general took over. But the last time I was there, officials acted as if they were doing me a favour by merely pointing to which door or stairway to take, which counter to go to, or which line to stand in, this seems to be the general attitude even now. The officials are not entitled to provide the service, and are merely bestowing their benevolence when they do. In that case, the survey is superfluous, maybe it's us who are at fault for not being worthy, or TIB for publishing such material and making the officials too demoralised to work anymore.

The writer is a member of the editorial team, The Daily Star.

Reports and surveys may be prepared, but what good are those, if one refuses to even acknowledge the corroding problem that the findings unveil?

Alternative narratives of trauma

ELORA HALIM CHOWDHURY

Nayanika Mookherjee's *The Spectral Wound: Sexual Violence, Public Memories, and the Bangladesh War of 1971* is a much awaited ethnography of trauma, rehabilitation and survival from the violent birth of Bangladesh. While there is an abundance of literature, particularly memoirs, fiction and personal essays written about the Bangladesh Independence War, most of these remain within the circuits of Bengali readership, and to a large extent are framed within a nationalist lens. In relation to such works, Mookherjee's book is groundbreaking at many levels: it places the Bangladesh Liberation War among the annals of modern South Asian and world history, provides thoughtful and nuanced accounts of survivors' articulations of their experiences, conceptualises violence and its consequences beyond the spectacular and the singular, situates women and gender as central to nation formation and building, and complicates the landscape of humanitarianism claiming to serve victims of war. Perhaps, one of the greatest contributions of the book is its central argument that there is no singular story of the birth of a nation, neither is there an iconic survivor who represents it.

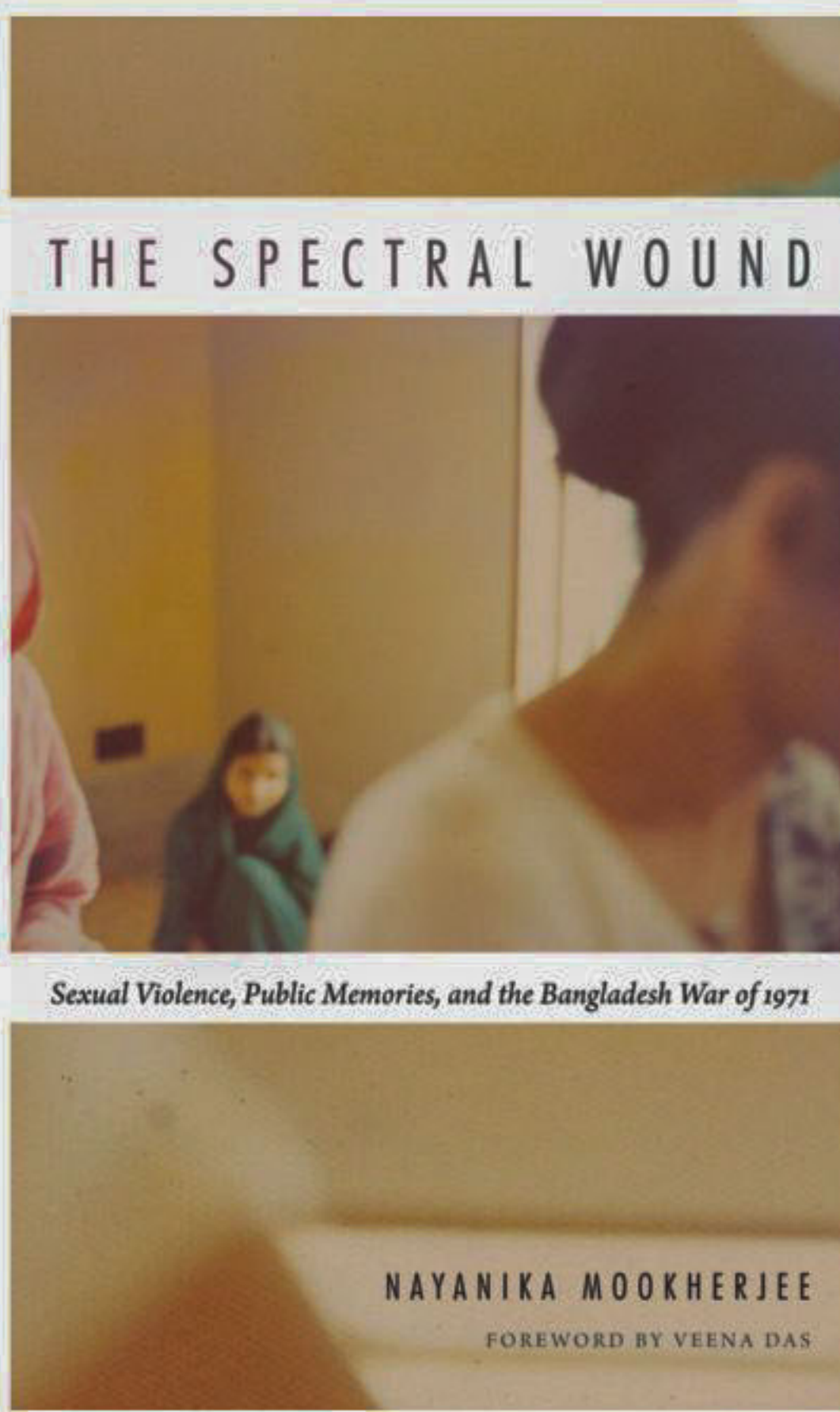
Recognition and reintegration of *birangonas* – an honorific bestowed by the government of Bangladesh to women survivors of sexual violence – into independent Bangladesh continues to be a contested issue, and Mookherjee delivers an incisive analysis of state, activist, scholarly and literary efforts to that end. She locates the recognition of *birangonas* by the state within "respect" and "expectation" economies. These are simultaneously mired in hierarchy and contestation. The repeated rituals of invoking martyrs and *muktijoddhas* shape the 'respect' economy (although women are omitted from this recognition beyond a sacrificial role), whereas they raise hope that the state will recognise and provide for the survivors, creating the 'expectation' economy. Not ascribing to either, Mookherjee details how the survivors wanted not only monetary compensation but also and more importantly recognition. As a *birangona* puts it herself, she seeks an opportunity to meet with the Prime

Minister Sheikh Hasina and "to cry with her and feel a bit light in the heart."

The newly formed nation saw rehabilitation as a sign of modernity, where sovereign power was dispersed among social workers as agents of state institutions. In the effort to absorb large number of raped women into the fold of the nation, institutionalised subordination of forms of femininity became the strategy. While older feminist activists saw the declaration of *birangona* status protected women from the backward rural religious communities and their ideologies, the younger feminists thought it was a way to correct the middle class hypocrisy surrounding female chastity. All efforts, however, led to the invisibilising of the *birangonas* (absorbing into nation), whereby their suffering is covered (or "combed over", i.e., searched and obscured).

Rehabilitation programmes perpetuated conventional social norms of gender by disciplining women into roles of "productive workers" and "useful citizens." These very programmes, nevertheless, at the same time defied the orientalist ways of knowing and telling stories of sexual violence, which articulated a singular focus on third world patriarchy at work in the women's sufferings.

Within the framework of suffering and agency, the activists only see the resistant (masculinised) *birangona* as subject of history. Tape recorded accounts freeze them orally while iconic film, print, television and photographic images perpetuate a certain "authentic" telling of their experience. The testimonial/speech act is unequal and exploitative and Mookherjee's informants ask, "Are they doing business by us?" The commodification of the written and spoken word lead to women being suspicious of human rights narrations. Even feminist stories reinscribe personal trauma into testimonial cultures seeking to transform *birangonas'* experiences as "truth" in public memorialisations of war's glory. It befits the saviour paradigm of human rights culture alive in the middle class urban activist community in Bangladesh. The cautious conclusion is trauma ought not to be understood as homogenous; we need alternative narratives that do not freeze,



Sexual Violence, Public Memories, and the Bangladesh War of 1971

NAYANIKA MOOKHERJEE FOREWORD BY VEENA DAS

normalise, make extraordinary or comb over survivor stories. Glimpses of these alternative narratives can be seen in Tarek and Catherine Masud's film, *Women and War*, or a *bhatiali* song composed by a *birangona*. As a scholar of gender violence and human rights narrative, I found the chapter on literary and visual representations of the *birangona* particularly fascinating. The title of the book, *Spectral Wound...* is befitting to the discussion of the absent presence of the *birangona*, wherein in many of these genres she is called into presence, harbour erotic attraction and/or revulsion, and then made to exit from the narratives altogether. The spectre of the *birangona* remains in her absent presence as

she has to be harkened, yet she cannot claim an autonomous space in society; thereby the script reaffirms patriarchal nationalism. Mechanical reproduction and circulation of this genre adds to the presumed authenticity of the dishevelled, listless, mad, unstable, suicidal, muted *birangona*. Curiously, no reference is made here to Kaberi Gayen's study of representation of women in *Muktijuddho* films, which traces this gendered discussion of war cinema within the vicissitudes of the market for commercial films in Bangladesh, and its evolution over decades. Also surprising is the author's comparison of the "eroticised *birangona*" in Rubaiyat Hossain's film *Meherjaan* and Yasmine Kabir's *A Certain Liberation*, given the two characters – one an actual *birangona* and the other fictional – represent very different experiences. Can one imagine a *birangona*, who is a sexual subject, exercising sexual agency without being rendered available/eroticised? Recent writings of women of colour feminists, including Jennifer Nash and Triva Lindsey have dealt brilliantly with such conceptualisations with regard to gendered agency of enslaved African American women in the US, and their legacy in contemporary renditions of black women's sexuality. I would nudge the author to take another look at Shameem Akhtar's film, *Itihaash Konna*, where admittedly *birangona* Konika is removed from the plot by way of suicide, thereby, aligning the film with the exit narrative, yet at the same time integrating a second *birangona*, a Hindu woman named Konok, into the script. It is Konok who raises Ananya, the war child in this film. Is there a hint of reconciliation in this rendition that is a signal to yet another alternative feminist vision and practice?

Critical, reflective, breaking new ground in our understanding of gender violence, memory and recuperation, Nayanika Mookherjee's extraordinary ethnography is essential reading for students of feminist theory, Anthropology, Bangladesh and South Asia Studies.

The writer is Associate Professor and Chair of the Department of Women's & Gender Studies at the University of Massachusetts, Boston.

Recognition and reintegration of *birangonas* – an honorific bestowed by the government of Bangladesh to women survivors of sexual violence – into independent Bangladesh continues to be a contested issue, and Mookherjee delivers an incisive analysis of state, activist, scholarly and literary efforts to that end.

QUOTABLE Quote

ANTONIO GRAMSCI

"The point of modernity is to live a life without illusions while not becoming disillusioned"

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 1 Barista's creation
- 6 Oregon's capital
- 11 Patriot Allen
- 12 Sheeplike
- 13 Publicity act
- 14 Majestic
- 15 Day warmer
- 16 Go bad
- 18 Rx payer
- 19 Wrap up
- 20 Golfer Ernie
- 21 Tycoon Turner
- 22 Not optional
- 24 Single
- 25 "The Barber of Seville" composer
- 27 Head honcho
- 29 Injury assuager
- 32 Hill resident
- 33 European peak
- 34 Attain
- 35 Army address
- 36 School org.
- 37 Bikini top
- 38 Whiskey drinks

DOWN

- 1 Abate
- 2 Bring into harmony
- 3 Astounded
- 4 Sandy color
- 5 Menu section
- 6 Classes
- 7 Hail, to Caesar
- 8 2013 Pearl Jam album
- 9 Tooth layer
- 10 Tune
- 17 Tar
- 23 Uno doubled
- 24 Low digit
- 26 Deadlock
- 27 Deep singers
- 28 Like some bagels
- 30 Infer
- 31 Less fresh
- 33 Church areas
- 39 Regret
- 41 Mythical piper

YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

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B	E	L	L	E	A	R	A	G	E	N	T
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P	A	P	E	R	F	L	O	W	E	R	
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BEETLE BAILEY by Mort Walker

BABY BLUES by Kirkman & Scott