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interviewing liberation fighters to not make the women conspicuous.

While I was doing that, one day one of the husbands of the women came over and said, "How come you are not coming and interviewing us, we are the main people for which this place is known. Why are you interviewing all these other people?" So they literally invited me over. But what is interesting is that their wives were very resistant. The husband would say "speak into the machine," as if the machine is meant for another wider audience. But the women were definitely resistant, saying "amar kaj acche, ami korbo na, amar shomoy nai." (I have work, I won't do it, I don't have the time.)

And yet what the women were willing to talk about was what happened to them in the 1990s. As you know these women were being brought back and forth [to and from Dhaka to give testimonies] and they were given lots of promises which were not fulfilled, and then when they went back to their village, the villagers would be jealous, and subject them to *khota* (scorn). The women would say that while they were given chairs to sit in Dhaka as a sign of respect, in the village the chairs were pulled away. So they were being made more vulnerable through this honouring process.

**TDS:** You make a differentiation between the words 'trauma' and 'wound'. You are more interested, not in the incident, but in their post-conflict lives. Could you explain why?

**NM:** I did not ask the women what happened in '71. To me what was important was what the women themselves wanted to talk about and how their lives have been after the war. As a result, what came out was how the violent experiences of these women emerged in all kinds of ways, which exist on an everyday basis, but which are not articulated in that kind of stark, 'traumatic' way.

For example, this woman, whom I will call Shirin, is a government official. I chanced upon her. And when I said I am looking for the experiences of women in government documents she scolded me by saying: "You think you will find experiences of *birangonas*, that too in government documents?" Then she started to talk about her first husband: they had been childhood sweethearts. During the war, her husband came to visit her, and soon after he came, there was a banging on the door. They realise he has been followed. So he asks her to go away and hide. He gets killed, and she is a witness. But then she gets found.

At this point Shirin is playing with the paperweight on her desk. And then she continues by saying: because of what happened to her during the war, she had to marry her cousin, for whom she says she has no respect, as she loves her first husband. Her second husband knows she loves her first husband more, so when she is praying, she is thinking about him and her present husband gets jealous. She has to keep the photograph of the first husband locked away in her office cupboard. For Shirin, her pain lies in not being able to talk about her first husband in her everydayness. And this is a direct result of what happened to her during the war.

So that's why it's important for us to work out post-conflict accounts, precisely to know how this violent experience had an

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effect on the women's subsequent lives. This is where the wound comes in. The *Birangona* is considered in Bangladesh as either being physically 'abnormal' or someone who has been ostracised from their family or

the idea links up with the idea of combing. It's a similar logic. I already explained why wound. She is either understood through her dishevelled hair, bleak look, muted sobs. Or the *Birangona* is assumed to be someone who is outside family structures, zones of nurturing.

*Spectral Wound* links up with the idea of the hiding and the searching. I take it from Jacques Derrida's idea of the *Revenant* — how something is present at the very moment of being made to be absent at the same time. The *Birangona* is made to be present while at the same time the complexities of her life story are completely removed or taken away. I will give you an example.

There was an enactment of an oral history project. The story is that this woman goes home because her two brothers have died from cholera. The Pakistani army finds her and rapes her. Her husband comes over from another village. She is very ill for a year, and her husband looks after her, takes her to the *kobirej daktar*. He is a kind sensitive man, and they are still together today. When this was re-enacted, it was portrayed that the woman lives at her mother's house, that her husband did not take her back and she has

way in which people are actually living their lives and not think of her as something abnormal.

**TDS:** You also talk about literary and film representations of *Birangonas* in the post-war period. Do you see any change today?

**NM:** In the past literary and film representations the *Birangona* is predominantly a horrific figure. All *Birangonas* usually commit suicide or are made to exit the scene. The liberation fighters come in and protect her and save her. But there has been a huge change in the representation from 2000 onwards. I talked about that in the last chapter of the book. There's Shaheen Akhtar's *Talaash*, Yasmin Kabir's *Aro Ek Shadhinota*, and Tareq and Catherine Masud's *Women and War*, which go beyond the account of the *Birangona* as someone who is only horrific or 'abnormal.'

**TDS:** What are the ethical concerns that researchers, activists or journalists working with *Birangonas* should be mindful of?

**NM:** The main thing thing to give to this work is time. A lot of the work that happened in the 90s were very quick work. People should go properly and not be like



Advertisement of Agrani Bank that reads 'Violated Shyamoli and her mute sobs want to say, never again, no more genocide', *Dainik Bangla*, Genocide Issue, December 1972.

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community. I am sure these have happened, but that was not the only way Bangladeshi families dealt with these women.

I hardly use the word trauma because it has become this transnational word, which is supposed to stand in for something, like flashbacks. These women are carrying on with their lives. The injury of what happened is coming up in different ways, it need not be something sensational like the understanding we have of the *Birangona*. Otherwise we would never understand what happened to the *Birangonas* in terms of their experiences of the war.

**TDS:** The nationalist narrative of 1971 has resulted in a construct of a generic, traumatised *Birangona*. How does this tie up with the name of your book, *The Spectral Wound*?

**NM:** I call the book *Spectral Wound* because

no contact with him.

And today, the problem for her — she is the second wife of the husband — is with the first wife, who would always raise the issue that her mother had to ask the husband to take her back. A *khota* emerges in the form of a competition between the co-wives in this instance.

In the enactment she has been made to be present with the horrors of the war, but immediately the complexities of being the second wife, that the husband had looked after her, have been completely taken out. She has been frozen, made to be present as a figure who is steeped in the horror of the war only.

And this has happened many times as I show in the book. Changing stories to make it horrific. I would say, why not keep the actual story so people understand the

"oh how did you feel" and in 10 minutes catch the bus back to Dhaka.

With time, there's the need to contextualise what happened locally. You need to ask other people their experiences so that you don't make the *Birangona*'s interview conspicuous. So that others don't feel left out, and a jealousy economy arises which results in scorn for the *Birangona*.

The visibility that something is happening to them is what generates problems. So not making quick visits, not making them conspicuous, talking to other people, researching the local area. It is also important to set up a relationship with them.

For me what was important was not asking them what happened, letting them

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