

SEXUAL VIOLENCE THROUGH THE DECADES

REVIEW OF 'THE NATION BORN: THE BANGLADESH PAPERS', NEW DELHI, ZUBAAN, 2016

FIRDOUS AZIM

Of the Nation Born: The Bangladesh Papers edited by Hameeda Hossain and Amena Mohsin is part of the Zubaan Series on Sexual Violence and Impunity in South Asia. The words 'sexual violence and impunity' are operative in this series, and the editors have put these terms together with the sense of nation, including the war of liberation, as well as the violence that continues to be unleashed on women of different communities. The chapters that comprise the volume reflect assiduous research which together put into question our notions of nationalism, our sense of rights and the safety and security of our citizens. While violence against women is the main focus of the book, this violence is seen to be perpetrated within a lot of other factors such as nationality, community and differences of class and language. The violence committed against women thus constitutes a narrative of social exclusions which the state and its law enforcing agencies, including its legal structures, seem to have failed to address.

Recent statistics regarding the position of women in Bangladesh are indeed startling and reveal the vulnerability of women in the very intimate sphere of marriage and the family, and in the public sphere, from educational institutions to places of work. The book takes us to the wider social and political ramifications of such violence, and by gendering nationalist narratives, problematises the narrative of liberation, growth and development.

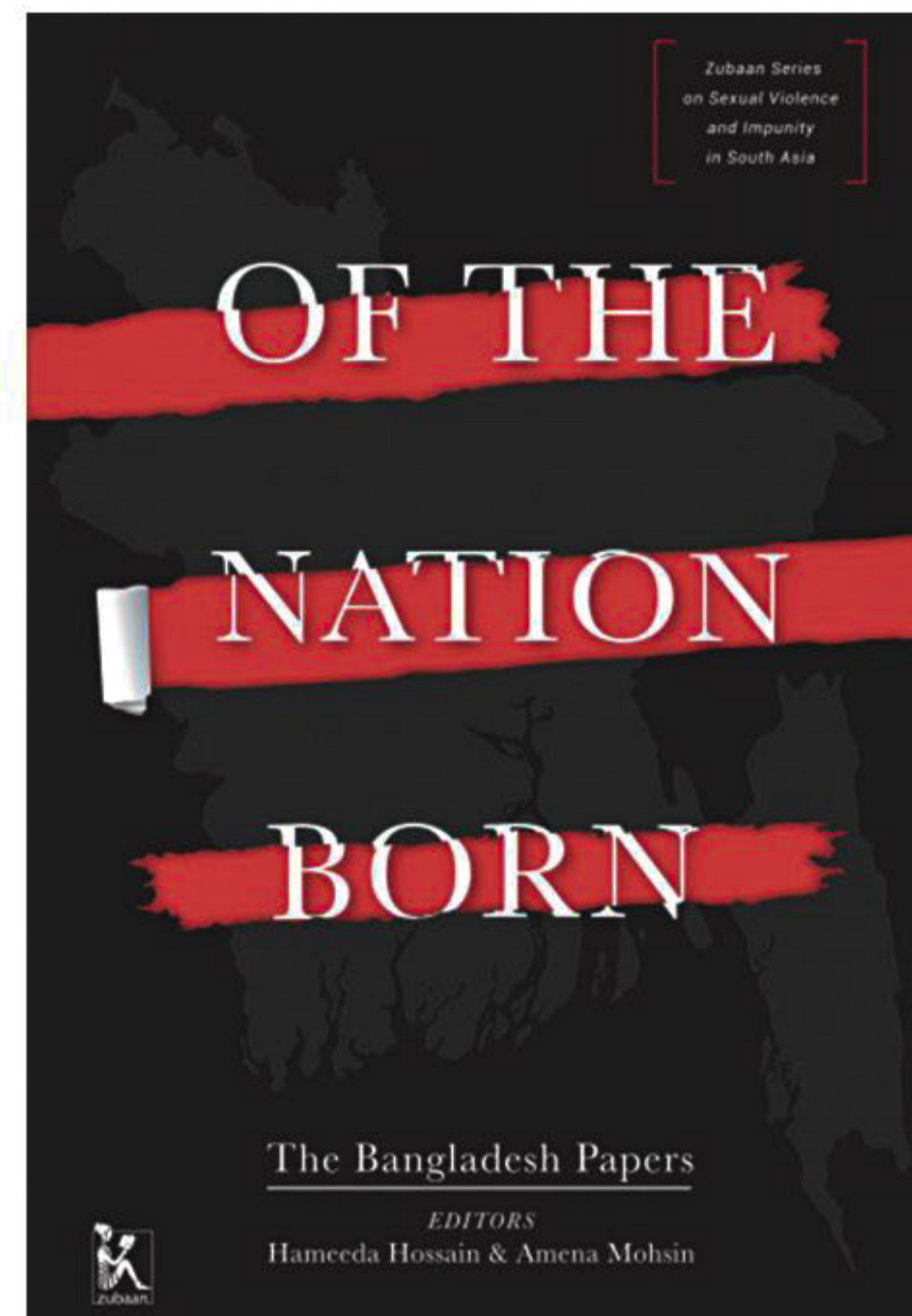
The book is divided into two sections, the first consisting of articles by individual scholars and the second being a compendium of interviews and first-person narratives. The reader can however look at the first section in 3 parts: the first three chapters, Chapters 4-6 which form a hiatus or a bridge and the chapters 7 and 8, bringing back to focus the situation in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT).

The first three chapters deal with the history of rapes committed during the 1971 war of liberation. The first article in the book, "Gendered States," written by Dina Siddiqi, traces a genealogy of the literature on violence, mainly academic, but also looking at the work of NGO's and questions and issues raised by the women's movement. She begins with the revival of the interest in *birangonas*, which she reckons is part of an international interest in rape as a war crime in the 1990's, in response to the events in the former Yugoslavia as well as the Congo and Rwanda. The largely-silenced *birangona* was brought back to nationalist narratives, and the many

facets of this 'bringing back' are examined here. The demand for justice and reparation, which perhaps began with the *Gano Adalat* led by Jahanara Imam and has been followed in the recent war crimes trials have also been analysed. But perhaps the most interesting part of the genealogy that the article draws is the figure of the *birangona* herself and the ways in which she is brought into the discourse. The emerging literature on *birangonas* is guided by a feminist approach to national history, and Siddiqi's article helps to limn a feminist contour for the nation.

Siddiqi's article points to the silences and obfuscations that still mark the history of rape in 1971. She goes on to look at the history of rape and abduction in the CHT that continues, and this other instance of state-sponsored violence can be seen as a continuation of the tortures inflicted on women in times and spaces of conflict, as well as in the formation of nations and states.

The juxtaposition of rapes in 1971 and the ongoing crisis in the CHT is followed further in Amena Mohsin's article "The History of Sexual Violence, Impunity and Conflict." This structure draws the reader away from a comfortable position of decrying the violence unleashed on "our" women by the Pakistanis, but asks him/her to look at the violence that the Bangladesh nation



perpetrates on "other" women. It forces us to look at the limitations of citizenship, and the vulnerabilities of women's bodies, which, as Mohsin reminds us, are supposed to be the carriers of culture, and hence violation of these bodies means an attack on the enemy. Mohsin's article is illustrated by first-person interviews of victims of war rape both in 1971 and in contemporary CHT, and questions what reparation and justice may mean for these women.

The third article Bina d'Costa's "*Birangona*" looks closely at the trial procedure, putting it into a wider context, by bringing in the Cambodian war crimes trials. "Bearing witness" is a problematic gesture, somehow making the woman's body a site of examination where the history of the nation is put through a fresh perusal. The very term *birangona* is under question as the state seeks to provide reparation not as *birangona* to these women, but as *muktijoddha*. Who is a freedom fighter needs to be determined, and the very inclusion of *birangonas* into *muktijoddhas* perhaps calls for a fresh examination of the case.

These three chapters provide the national backdrop against which the rights of women, their position and so on are questioned. Women's national history is very

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much alive in the present, and the lives of women affected by the violence of the Pakistani army in 1971 are still marked by that incident. Their suffering did not end with the liberation of the country, but the long journey to recognition and rehabilitation continues. Conflict-based violence also continues, and 'our' women's fates have not prevented us from inflicting similar violence on 'other' women.

The following three articles deal with laws and the difficulty of accessing them. Faustina Pereira, Ishita Dutta and Hameeda Hossain explore the ways in which laws themselves are inaccessible, and do not provide a means of reparation and justice to women. For example, Ishita Dutta's article explores the ways in which medico-legal evidence is gathered and collected as evidence, with no regard for the dignity of a rape survivor. This section gives us a good idea of how laws, legal procedures as well as community practices redound on the woman who is a victim/survivor of horrendous acts such as rape.

The book is enriched with interviews and first-person narratives of women who had worked with the survivors of the 1971 war rapes, of researchers, and of victims/survivors themselves. These are mostly translated pieces, and the translators need to be commended on the ease with which most of the conversations have been

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rendered into English. Though this is not uniformly true, most of the pieces read well. A special mention must also be made of the photo essay on Kalpana Chakma by Shahidul Alam, which includes English translations of poems by Kabita Chakma. The multi-media mode of presentation makes it an interesting document, demonstrative of the many ways of documentation and creating historical narratives.

Of the Nation Born is indeed a timely publication, redrawing and retelling the historical narrative of the nation. It performs two tasks simultaneously: it genders the history of Bangladesh, and places the issue of violence against women, and the impunities that survivors/victims of such violence suffer, within a larger national and social framework. Thus women - 'of the nation born' - live their lives within the parameters of in/justice, discrimination and deprivation that the nation perpetrates through its justice system, its law-enforcement agencies, and the social, familial structures that it nurtures and draws on. This book is a valuable addition to the ongoing feminist rewriting of history as well as to the feminist analyses of our social and political realities.

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I spent a lot of 2016 grieving. The worlds I belong to were roiled by news-making disaster all through last year. A hate-mongering would-be autocrat ascended to the highest political office in the United States, where I currently live. The Holey Artisan Bakery siege in Dhaka was preceded and followed by reports of violence against minorities across Bangladesh, where I used to live. Demonetisation left chaos in its wake in India, home of my extended family; and bigotry-based populist authoritarianism continued to gain strength and vigour across the globe.



PHOTO: INTERNET

HOW FILMS HELP

Despite the multitude of memes that gloomily asserted 2016's exceptional awfulness, I sternly reminded myself that all years are terrible for most people on this planet, given that there are more poor people than rich ones, more hungry people than well-fed ones. I didn't want to lose perspective just because the bad news seemed to be coming to me from closer, more familiar quarters.

But I, like just about everybody I knew, couldn't help but lose heart at the state of affairs. I wondered how I would keep finding the emotional energy to work and make myself useful to underserved communities at a time when the values of inclusivity and justice that I cherished seemed to be roundly rejected by loud, violent hordes.

I found my solace in the dark. I've watched film after film the past few months, not in an effort to escape my reality, but in an attempt to make sense of that reality and to return to it with more clarity. I've always gone to cinema for its restorative magic, its ability not only to reproduce life but to parse its truths. Films can reduce the messy, inchoate business of living into something trite and phony. They can also distil those truths into revelatory image and sound and word.

Consider *Moonlight*. It is a pointillist bildungsroman, a story told in sidelong glances and silent stares about one young, queer, black boy growing up around poverty and addiction in Florida. The film is gentle and undidactic. It makes no facile thesis statements about queerness or blackness or poverty or addiction. It does something far more sorcerous: It brings

you marvelously close to the light and silence and air around this boy, who suffers blow after often literal blow, and whose experiences may not be like yours in any way. It asks you to see him, a person built of love and pain, and pay attention.

I walked out of *Moonlight* feeling a sort of hushed joy, awed by its thoughtful craft but also inspired by the keenness of its empathy. I wanted to keep seeing with the film's clear-eyed, loving, unsentimental eyes, even if the sights around me seemed too unrelentingly brutal sometimes.

No wonder, then, that I exulted at the end of another tedious Oscars ceremony, when *Moonlight* scored a surprise Best Film victory. Tarell Alvin McCraney, the writer of the unproduced play the movie is based on, had spoken words of explicit support earlier in the night to the queer boys and girls and gender non-conforming (perhaps the first time GNC identities were acknowledged on the venerable Oscars stage) kids watching, and I got moist-eyed. I cheered for those kids and wished that I'd seen someone on television say those words when I was growing up.

A film like *Moonlight* makes visible the power of representation in art. When artists, against incredible systemic odds, are able to send into the world like a crimson flare work where the historically othered is writ large and legible and nuanced, many young people who witness something of themselves in that art are given assurance of the vitality of their own stories, their own minds and bodies.

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Cinema, at its most effective, shows one not only as one *is*, but as one *can be*. It vividly suggests the radiant possibilities of the human condition as something eminently realisable. Not long after the Presidential Elections in the States, I had a good, long, cathartic cry at the conclusion of *Neerja*, an Indian film that came out last year. The film is based on the real-life story of a young flight purser who was killed in an attempt to evacuate a hijacked flight and save the lives of her passengers.

On paper, this narrative sounds like those culled-from-the-headlines tragedies

that elicit in one a vague, high-minded sort of admiration and are then forgotten. On film, however, it becomes a reminder that courage isn't an unflagging, spectacular thing, but is perhaps forged amid the quotidian pleasures and pains of work, family, and friendship.

Neerja Bhanot, as portrayed in this film, was a wonderfully everyday young woman, who had an ordinary family life, enjoyed singing and dancing and a good joke, had lived through the trauma of domestic abuse, and was looking joyously forward – to professional success, to love, to her birthday. This sounds like me, or like some of you. The film is terrific in finding a way into her mind, where her ordinariness is in no way at odds with her bravery.

Her valour is the kind I can aspire to, the sort of cobbled-together, unshowy, ultimately resolute thing that I hope desperately I can muster in the face of adversity. It is not dissimilar to the valour I see every day in people around me who agitate tirelessly and at great risk to themselves for justice. *Neerja* thoughtfully demonstrated to me that behind such impossible-seeming heroism are life-sized persons, anxious and afraid and funny and silly and working to keep it all together. It was okay, I told myself after my good, long cry, to be scared and despairing, because the will to work and do good would eventually rise again from the fear and despair.

I've come into this year, most of its days already marked with dismaying international incidents, with some of that succor I found in a darkened theatre. I found it elsewhere, too, of course – in community, in work, in reading and writing and dancing. But the movies are so often dismissed as the modern day circuses from that Roman formulation, noisome spectacles that serve to distract and anesthetise, that a belated love letter to the good ones, the ones that helped, doesn't seem undue as I move forward with trepidation and hope. ■

The writer lives in Chicago and works in HIV testing and prevention counselling.