



Nayanika Mookherjee

PHOTO: KAZI TAHSSIN AGAZ APURBO

# Ethical challenges of documenting Birangonas

A conversation with Nayanika Mookherjee

**Nayanika Mookherjee is an Associate Professor (Reader) in the Anthropology department in Durham University and author of *The Spectral Wound: Sexual Violence, Public Memories and the Bangladesh War of 1971* [Published by Duke University Press (2015) and *Zubaan* (the South Asian version came out in 2016)].**

**As a British Academy fellow she is currently doing new research on the "war babies" of 1971 and transnational adoption. In this interview with Sushmita S Preetha, Editor, Star Weekend, The Daily Star, she talks about the importance of ethical guidelines while documenting the experiences and narratives of birangonas so that good intentions of researchers and journalists do not result in further repercussions for the survivors.**

**You are working with various stakeholders to develop an ethical guideline when documenting the narratives of birangonas. Can you tell us a bit more about this project and why you think it's important to develop these guidelines at this point in time?**

We organised two collaborative workshops over the past year, between the University of Durham and Research Initiatives Bangladesh (RIB). The second workshop had the support of the Ministry of Liberation War Affairs of the Bangladesh government. The workshops were held primarily to propose a set of ethical guidelines to help people who work with birangonas to have a few things in mind to avoid any pitfalls that might arise as a result of recording their narratives. In the first workshop held in November, we had an elaborate discussion with researchers, journalists, filmmakers, visual artists and others working with birangonas, who have had experience of recording their testimonies. In the workshop last month (August 2017), we presented a set of draft guidelines to this same cohort of people. We have also been working with a graphic artist based in Dhaka to visualise or give form to the draft guidelines, which, once finalised, we hope can be disseminated to journalists, filmmakers, or schools maybe—to anyone who is working on the subject. Both these things—the guidelines and the visual handbook—emerge from the findings of my book, *Spectral Wound: Sexual Violence, Public Memories, and the Bangladesh War of 1971*.

Right now, the government is adding more people's name to the gazette and birangonas are getting their *bhata* (compensation), which is around Tk 10,000 per month. Now that they have been listed, we should see how this has been going on, what are the focus and implications within the families. The fact that they are getting money regularly as freedom fighters has added stature for them. At a time when the government is adding more names to the gazette and we are locally finding survivors whose names might be added to the gazette, it becomes of particular significance, then, that a set of guidelines be applied—if a set of national guidelines come about in the end, and if the government brings it out as a formal policy—for people who are going and working with birangonas before they go and do the interviews.

**Can you elaborate on some of the problematic ways in which oral histories of birangonas have been collected thus far?**

When I started doing my fieldwork in the late 1990s, there were many oral history projects being carried out by various activist groups, journalists, filmmakers and others. But what I increasingly found was that for many of the women I worked with, what was important

was not to talk about the gory details of '71—it doesn't really help them anymore to recount exactly what happened. What they wanted to talk about is what happened to them in the 1990s and that involves how various groups were approaching them, bringing them back to Dhaka or taking them to the local thana area to make them a part of their commemorative programmes. But then, they did not get the reparation packages that they were promised. They were told that they would be given jobs, their health needs would be addressed, their houses would be rebuilt. But they came to the villages with only a towel or a saree or some little food. As they would say, "We have been given a chair, but that chair has been taken away from behind us." Increasingly, what you find in testimonial cultures—and which has happened in Bangladesh—unless it is backed up by a serious reparation package, a disconnect emerges between the need to document these testimonies on one hand, and survivors' needs and priorities, on the other, which would enable them in a post-conflict phase. Those are the findings that emerged for me, and which I refer to as talkable *itihash*, and they refer to as *mela itihash/charam itihash*. *Charam itihash* is for them the disconnect between the testimonial culture and the need to document the atrocities conducted in 1971.

During the process of oral history recording, the women themselves were going through a second and third process of violations by people who were intending to do good, or add to the evidence. In a way, you can't have an evidence pool without looking after the survivors and their needs. It is this disconnect that comes out in the book, which, as you know, is a triangulation—it's not just about the survivors, it's about the families and communities, as well as what is happening among the activist community and state actors, and then the huge visual and literary representation which is very important in Bangladesh and which has existed since '71.

**In your book, you talk about how some of the details of their lives and experiences were "combed over" and we saw a very simplistic version of their lives—perhaps what the public wanted to hear. What were some of the stories that were combed over, and what was lost in the process of losing those stories?**

When I use the phrase combing of history, I use it to mean two things. Combing has meant a process of covering—as in when you comb someone's hair and how you can cover something up—as well as searching. I'll give you an example of what was happening in many of the activists' restaging of the narratives. For instance, there was an activist

account of someone called Fhuljaan (not her real name), who gets raped during the war in her mother's house and loses her child in the process. Her husband, in this retelling, does not accept her and today she lives in the mother's house. This is the same Fhuljaan whose story is that she was visiting her mother's house—her two brothers had died of cholera while she was in her mother's house; the Pakistani army came and raped her. She was in an incredibly bad state physically; her husband, who is still her husband, came over to her mother's house, was very upset, took her back. She was bedridden for a year. In fact, she is actually his second wife, and the issue of rape is often raised by the first wife in terms of everyday

politics, to keep someone who is already maybe weak as weak, or dominated as dominated, or unequal as unequal. So there is a political economy of stigma, honour and shame. I show this through various examples in *The Spectral Wound*.

Many activists felt they couldn't give a happily-ever-after story for a birangona because then it wouldn't translate her "trauma" to the younger generation. Trauma needs to be thought of without the wound itself. The trauma of the birangona is not only in becoming "abnormal" or physically aberrant or having no family. Women are living with these experiences of violence in all kinds of ways. We need to understand how violence and its social ramifications are

comes from. Many of them are my friends. And so, I understand why they were doing what they were doing. When I presented this work, I presented it to the organisation which had carried out the oral history project and restaging while I was doing my research. In a way, it became an interactive dialogue between us to think through how to document some of these narratives. The response in Bangladesh has been great and maybe that has been possible because the book was not finished in a rush precisely because I was careful not to vilify any one community.

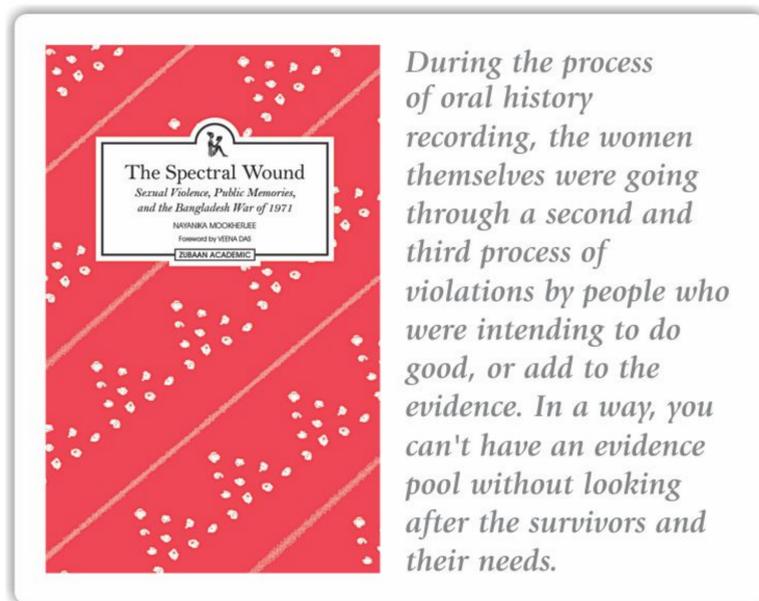
**What are some of the guidelines that researchers should follow when documenting birangonas?**

The issue of time is really important because we need time to go and do these interviews. It is important that we find out the socio-political context in which sexual violence occurred and not just focussing on the isolated accounts of these people. We need to ask how they are sustaining in the post-conflict phase. In discussing issues of shame and stigma, the political context of the area becomes crucial.

It is important to pay attention to how one uses various recording devices, and the intrusions that are involved in many instances. For example, there have been instances where researchers have entered a room where a woman was unwell and lying on her bed, and yet asked her, "What happened to you in 71?" There's also the issue of dilemmas of commemoration when women are brought over: what are the pros and cons? As researchers and people who are recording these histories, we need to pay attention to what's at stake in the process. Even if women are brought to Dhaka, the very fact that they are taken to Dhaka, even if they are not interviewed, might give rise to problems for them. It is important to bring the community on board if that is relevant. All these need a bit of time commitment.

There is a need for a descriptive narrative as opposed to a simplistic narrative. The Fhuljaan story is a clear example. Also the issue of anonymity vs confidentiality—do we anonymise these accounts or keep it confidential or publicise these names? I went for anonymising, but many of these women said, "these are my words, why isn't my name there?"

And of course, the post-testimony phase. Once we take testimonies, we also need to go back to the women or the families with whom we have worked with, so it becomes important to do a follow-up of the reparation packages themselves. These are some of the proposed guidelines which we are going to talk through with the Ministry and various stakeholders involved in the processes.



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domestic co-wife politics today. Many activists assumed that since she was facing scorn, it must have been because the husband is an insensitive man. There is a strong assumption that all women were ostracised, that no one was accepted back.

But this is the same husband who has lived with her, is a sensitive man, and has looked after her. What is lost in these kind of translations from a complex life story to a restaging for human rights narrative is the sociality of violence with which Fhuljaan has lived till today. Instead of thinking of stigma, shame and scorn as given categories, we need to understand when and why these categories are raised. Here I would argue stigma is often raised as an arsenal for local, everyday

extremely varied, and that it need not always be seen as a horrific account. That horrificity needs to be decentred or nuanced in terms of understanding what the effects of war are on women's lives till today.

**What has been the response to your book from the activists and researchers you talk about in your book?**

Actually, no one has raised any issues about it. I am not trying to criticise the activist community for the sake of criticism. I also try to locate what I refer to as "their emotions and interests" in the book. In 1971, different kinds of families suffered different kinds of losses, so I am not romanticising the subaltern to valorise their loss only. I understand where the activist community