

Some Warriors Wear Saris

Remembering Language Movement veteran Dr Halima Khatun, who passed away on July 3, 2018, on her 85th birth anniversary

ANUSHUA ARIF

It isn't easy being the writer of the family, especially when your only competition is your grandmother who had written over 100 books in two different languages, like our legacy, our beloved Didu Dr Halima Khatun.

It isn't only her triumphs that she paved along the way, but the fact that she also managed to singlehandedly craft her only daughter, Pragna Laboni's successful life, is nothing short of amazing. The proof of her significance lies in the staggering number of "thank you" letters that continue to clutter up her desk to this day.

Born into a Muslim family on August 25, 1933, my grandmother had to fight patriarchy every day to accomplish her extensive list of achievements. After completing her Bachelor of Arts, she went on to receive not one but two Master's degrees in English and Bengali, but still felt like she should attain more. So her dedication for knowledge landed her in the University of Northern Colorado, where she got her PhD in Education in the year of 1966, which helped her gain the title as Director of Institute of Education and Research in Dhaka University.

Didu had a different take on life. Growing up, when my mother found out I enjoyed writing as a child, she made me promise that I would write something every week which only discouraged me and eventually, I stopped writing altogether. My grandmother on the other hand played a firsthand role in



Dr Halima Khatun (1933-2018).

enhancing my writing skills. Her regular quizzing from the Reader's Digest "word power" section has surely proven to be useful, especially because I still seek out new words every day. Also, her delivery of silly puns or fancy limericks has helped me realise my love for clever comedy, as well as accept humour as an offset buffer every time life gives me lemons!

Whenever in her presence, I never felt as though I was learning something. What she did was make sure I got the most out of the environment by preparing the perfect atmosphere. As soon as my eight-year-old self would walk into her mystical kingdom, I

would be greeted with the warmest welcome. It didn't matter that just last week I had broken her favourite vase which she bought from Moscow 20 something years ago, because this was truly a judgment-free zone.

When I announced that I wanted to write, Didu made sure there was a safe space. She would move all her important documents out of her sacred writing desk (which we were only to use when we clearly meant business). The holy table lamp would be turned on to make sure I was getting just enough light, so my baby eyes were never strained. She would bring out a crisp notepad from the hidden compartment underneath her magical desk. And then she would let me pick the neatest ballpoint pen with the sharpest tip, which produced strong yet delicate writing and made sure whatever content made its way into the milky white paper would be as bright as myself!

A dictionary was always close by, as were a number of flash cards just in case we needed guidance. Whenever Didu and I teamed up and started on our stories, even Tagore had nothing on us. And after all this, if I suddenly changed my mind and wanted to write on the walls instead, she would whip out colourful chalks in a heartbeat and the whole house became my canvas. The doors, the tables and the walls were covered with my squiggly handwriting as she marvelled at how the colours complemented each other.

That was just one of the few ways my grandmother had gone above and beyond in

influencing me into the world of arts. In her presence, no error was considered an error because you could always learn from it and learning was pivotal.

Titles were not something that fascinated Didu, so her entire life had been dedicated to effectively making a difference in the world. She served as a Unesco consultant in Pokhara, Nepal in 1978 alongside visiting countries including Australia, Japan, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Philippines, Indonesia, South Korea and Fiji Islands as an active advocate for women's literacy as well as participating as a team member for training/teaching programmes in promoting primary education.

Didu was the grandmother who had read the entire Harry Potter series and considered herself mightier than Dumbledore. She made her own bags and started composting as a trend way before the Brooklyn hipsters were born. When she wasn't correcting doctoral theses or busy making sure the domestic help in our house were getting basic education, she was working on several projects at once, her latest being a Bengali-Sinhala dictionary.

Her other talents included being the most stubborn private tutor imaginable, the harshest publicist, the most intrusive doctor in all the land, our least favourite chaperone, as well as the famous cat whisperer.

Limitless knowledge on almost any given subject was her expertise and her infectious thirst for learning is something that's been

ingrained in everyone who had the pleasure of knowing her.

My grandmother, unlike many, knew exactly how to influence, guide and inspire those around her. Small acts such as the way she would bookmark articles or stories she thought I'd enjoy, or subscribing to teen magazines even when I was too busy spending time on the phone, eventually brought me back to my love for literature.

"Children do to society, what is done to them" said Dr Halima Khatun, language veteran of 1952, PhD holder, world traveller and a national treasure, but above all the matriarch of our family and my first best friend. She taught me not only my first alphabets but how to be kind to people and animals alike and just a mere personal narrative on a woman as massively brilliant, brave and bounteous doesn't even begin to sum up what it was like to be raised by such an all-rounder icon. She wrote for children, and thought for everyone, and as her granddaughter, all I can wish is to recognise and be grateful for all that is there to learn in this world and to never underestimate the power of education, so that her unparalleled guidance is not lost in vain.

Though my Didu may not be with me in physical presence today, on her birthday I thank her for being my reason to want to better myself every single day.

Anushua Arif is the granddaughter of Language Movement veteran Dr Halima Khatun.

The ethics of documenting sexual violence

MOYUKH MAHTAB

"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."

—Prof Nayanika Mookherjee, in an interview with The Daily Star, 2016

ON August 13, in a programme jointly organised by Research Initiatives Bangladesh (RIB) and Durham University, a set of guidelines for ethical documentation of birangonas was launched and submitted to the Liberation War Ministry for formal adoption. These guidelines were the result of multiple meetings, initiated by Dr Meghna Guhathakurta of RIB and Prof Nayanika Mookherjee of Durham University, over the last one year with researchers, professors, filmmakers, NGO workers and journalists, with input from women who had been raped during the Liberation War in 1971, to identify the ethical issues that have cropped up over the last four decades in portraying and documenting war-heroines. Over the course of the discussions, one thing was absolutely clear: this was an issue which had not received much attention and priority institutionally, be it from research institutes or from the media.

That the process of documentation, the questions that are asked, the environment in which this takes place, and ultimately the way the birangona is represented through preconceived, stereotyped notions can not only make these survivors go through another round of violation but also make them socially and economically vulnerable, has been lost on many who have worked with them.

Ferdousi Priyabhashini, who was present during the first meeting, shared her experiences with the press come every December, with those present. In one instance, a TV reporter,

when they had come to interview her, went as far as to ask her to look sad and dim the lights of the room, because that is what the image of a birangona was in his mind—a broken woman in a dark place. Another had simply walked in and blurted out: "Tell us what happened in '71."

A little history of how public memories of war-time rape have been shaped since 1971 may be of help to illustrate the point. In a historically unprecedented move, when the Liberation War ended in 1971, the government of Bangladesh termed the women who were raped during the nine months of war as birangonas—war heroines—not only acknowledging the sexual violence that these women faced, but it was also an effort to tackle the ostracism that was inevitably to follow. Efforts were made to rehabilitate these women and reduce the social ostracism they faced. Media reports

For a long time, our understanding of birangonas has remained confined to the event of rape. That explains the instances Priyabhashini mentioned.

abounded, identifying them and documenting their experiences. However, after 1975 the birangonas disappeared from the state discourse, although they remained alive in literature and films.

In the 1990s, during the Gono Adalat (People's Tribunal) trial of Chulam Azam, the focus on birangonas resurfaced. During the symbolic hearing, some of these



News clipping from Banglar Bani, September 2, 1972.

women were present and their narratives were read out as testimony. Professor Nayanika Mookherjee's book, *The Spectral Wound*, traces how the lives of these women were affected from their presence in commemorative events and in the media coverage which followed. On one hand, the post-war lives of the women were affected, as many in their villages saw their coming forth with their narratives as a means of using their "shame" for material benefit. At the same, in many instances, promises of reparation that were made to them never materialised. Their testimonies were homogenised, and the cultural portrayals of birangonas as women who had lost their "dignity", with hair dishevelled, gave rise to the stereotyped birangona figure. This stereotyped birangona is defined by "what happened in 1971", with no care for their post-war lives, and a figure rejected by their communities. Of course, the individual experiences of the women were not cared for. At the same time, when it comes to

cultural representations of the birangona, it is her "shame" which is stressed, but ironically, the violation has also been eroticised in many instances.

For a long time, and even today in mass media, our understanding of birangonas has remained confined to the event of rape. That explains the instances Priyabhashini mentioned. But as *Spectral Wound* shows, many of these women did not want to talk about the "trauma" of '71—they "themselves wanted to talk about 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," Prof Mookherjee explained in a 2016 interview.

The ethical guidelines presented in the programme took these experiences into consideration and propose that anyone who wants to carry out research on or interview birangonas must go through a contextual understanding of how

their work could affect these women. It sets out that only women who have voluntarily identified themselves should be interviewed and this process should not be done in haste. This was arrived at from past instances where journalists or researchers had gone to villages, hastily asked a few questions, and left—making the whole process sorely visible to the community.

Another important issue which the guidelines try to address is the sensationalisation of the birangonas' narratives or changing the narratives to fit preconceived moulds. Language, as always, has always been a tricky issue when talking about sexual violence, and this is noted in the guidelines. This point, relevant for researchers and journalists, will hopefully be more elaborately discussed if the guidelines are adopted.

The issue of continuous consent has been given priority too, as has the point of not making unjustified assurances of reparations. Most importantly, the guidelines stress on the need for respecting what these

women want to share and establishing a relationship with the women beyond the interview. The guidelines also try to explain that how these women were affected after the war, and how they folded their experiences into their everyday lives, is important for the documentation and understanding of sexual violence—it is important to respect the boundaries of what they want to talk about.

Today, government efforts to honour and support birangonas are considerable. As more and more names of survivors of sexual violence of 1971 are being collected and gazetted, and as survivors receive stipends, the issues mentioned in the guidelines have become all the more crucial. Names and addresses can easily be looked up and the potential for documentation and research work has increased, as has the risk of pushing these women into further vulnerabilities. Hopefully, these guidelines will be formally adopted by the ministry soon.

But a guideline is not something that can be legally enforced, and doing so could give rise to further complications which could actually restrict independent research. What is needed is institutionalisation of these ethical guidelines, something which is missing in our country. A pertinent point was made during the launching programme by one university teacher: most universities in Bangladesh have no ethics committees to oversee and guide researchers in their work and hold them accountable. The same remains the case with the media. Adoption of these guidelines by research institutions and universities would be a good start in not only ensuring that survivors are not harmed in any way in the process of documentation, but also in establishing a culture of prioritising ethics in research in our country. This is just as relevant for mass media, and these guidelines provide an excellent basis, not only for documenting and reporting on birangonas, but for all victims of sexual violence.

Moyukh Mahtab is a member of the editorial team at The Daily Star.

A WORD A DAY

OBNUBILATE
VERB

Darken or cover with or as if with a cloud; obscure.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS	29 Aardvark snack	6 Columnist
1 Database option	30 Sends overseas	Barrett
5 Balls	32 Involving	7 Dessert choice
9 Fine-tune	felling	8 Tucker of vaudeville
11 Casual shirts	34 Over there	10 Continued
13 Poet Breton	35 Hike route	12 Artery opener
14 Unsuitable	36 Plenty of	17 Swiss peak
15 Gun, as a motor	38 Hick	19 Fly high
16 Flair	39 Boxer Ali	22 Roadster
18 Bridge support	40 Ties the knot	24 Undo, as a law
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BEETLE BAILEY BY MORT WALKER

BABY BLUES BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT