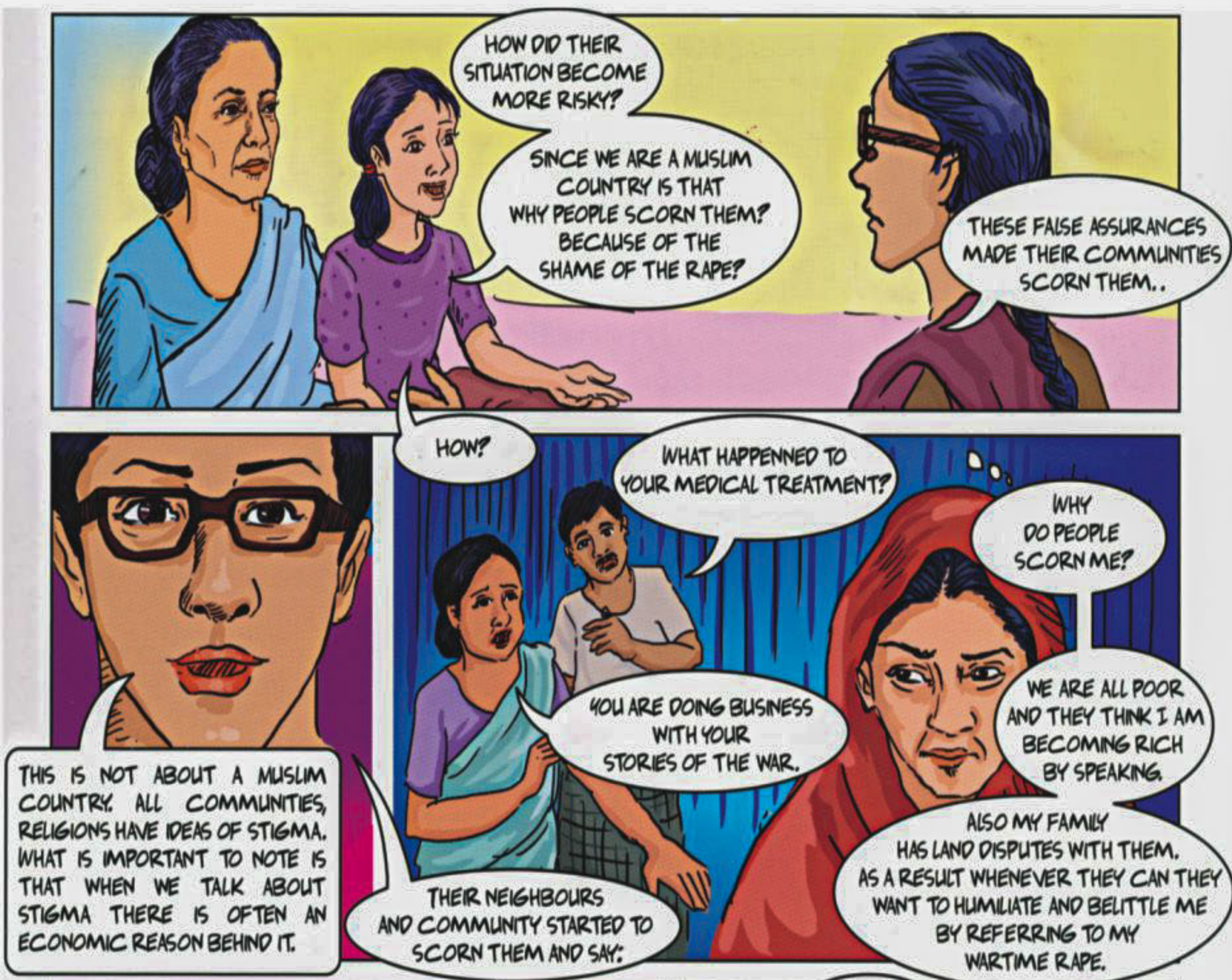


REPRESENTATION



After page 14

physically abused and evicted from homes. But their identity, Shundori stresses, comprise more than just the sum of their tragic experiences—it is also made up of their daily lives, their practices and individual outlooks on the issue of the birangona, and the bravery they have shown over the years. *Birangona* stresses how these identities can be captured in all their complexity only if the research on them is carried out responsibly. This includes sufficient secondary research, steering clear of sensationalism, protecting the survivors' interest and right to privacy, and investing enough time and effort in getting to know their stories.

In planning for the book, however, one of the trickiest challenges lay in choosing appropriate representation. The term 'birangona' had originally been adapted to accord respect to women raped during the war. But over the years, the title has generated the opposite effect, with the

women becoming socially marginalised and being recognised only as victims of wartime violence. Some of the survivors Professor Mookherjee interviewed accept the title of birangona, while many others feel strongly that they should be called *muktijoddha* (freedom fighters) instead. Keeping these debates in mind, Professor Mookherjee decided to name the book *Birangona* as a nod to its historical trajectory, especially given that Bangladesh is the only country to not maintain silence about the sexual violence that occurred during wartime. The desired effect of the book would be to bring the agency, the respect and the nuance, back to the women titled thus.

It achieves these results insofar as getting the conversation started. With as sensitive a topic as the ethics of talking to victims of sexual assault—and that too during wartime—having a simple visual primer helps. While researchers working on an extensive project might ideally have the time to go through Professor Mookherjee's



more detailed work in the *Spectral Wound*, the simple text and visual aid in this slim edition will likely be helpful for journalists, activists and other researchers on the go. And these instructions need not apply only when interviewing birangonas; it can be used when the research involves speaking to people on any other similarly sensitive matter.

The book claims to be a graphic "novel", since it fictionalises historical incidents. It isn't really a novel in the traditional sense, though. The fiction portion of it resides mainly in the frame of the narrative—the part where Labony learns about birangonas from her mother and grandmother—and the representation of the birangona's history through the grandmother's memories. But the reader is made constantly aware that it isn't meant to be read simply as fiction, not at least for the usual purposes of leisure and entertainment. Unlike most other historical fiction or nonfiction books on history, *Birangona* makes its desired effect

on the reader apparent. It's meant to inform and instruct, as is made plain from the title, the didactic tone of the text, and the headings labelling the stage of testimony in each illustration.

Because of these mixed elements, the downside is that it might confuse some readers—who exactly is it written for? Is it a "novel" for general readers, or a textbook of sorts for researchers and journalists?

The plus side is that it can be both. The book does a remarkable job of showing how the story of a birangona can be told appropriately, thereby demonstrating the very methods that it recommends. This places it at an interesting crossroads between genres—"graphic novel", historical account, and research manual—no doubt an interesting specimen of what a book can be and hope to accomplish.

Free downloads of the book will be available at their website: ethical-testimonies-svc.org.uk.

ABOUT TOWN

Hamlet

Organiser: Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy

Venue: Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy, Segun Bagicha

Date: April 19

Time: 7-9 pm



Shobdorothe Obhijatri

Organiser: Srota Abritti Sangsad

Venue: Central Public Library, Shahbagh

Date: April 19

Time: 7 pm

Through Her Eyes' Film screening

Organiser: Goethe-Institut Bangladesh

Venue: Goethe-Institut Bangladesh, House- 10, Road 9, Dhanmondi R/A

Date: April 18

Time: 5-7 pm

