

FICTION

The plebeians IN THE TWILIGHT

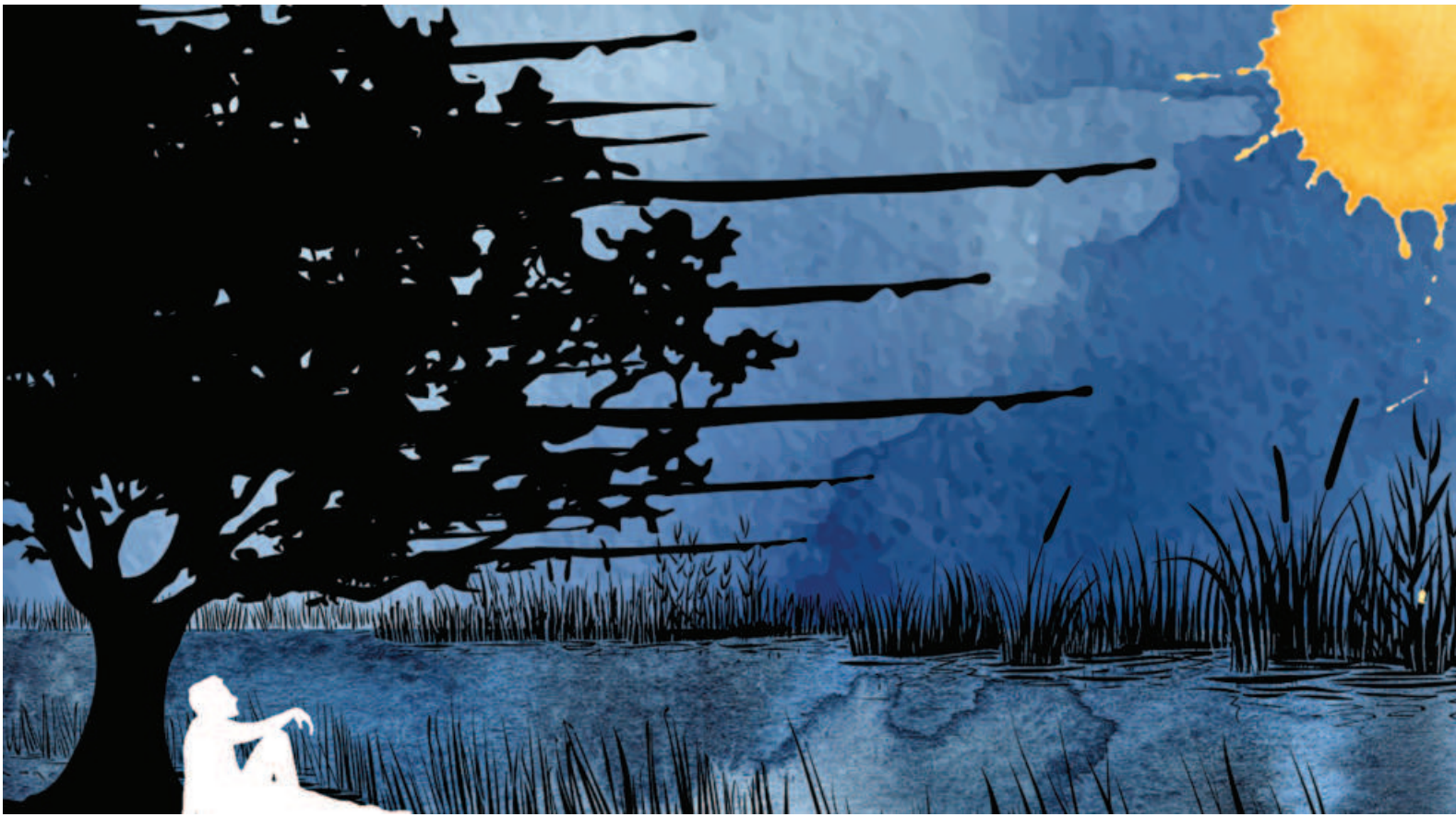


ILLUSTRATION: AMREETA LETHE

SHAWKAT ALI

It was the shade of the ashwath that vanquished all one's weariness from the fiery heat of Choitro. Or else it was not possible for fatigue to be eliminated so quickly. Even until a couple of hours ago, Shyamango's sight had been hazy. The objects he saw assumed weird, broken, and swaying forms. Time and again on the arduous road it had seemed that waves were ascending ahead of him, and then they seemed to descend into the fathomless. Even the steps he took were out of control. He was lurching ahead like an intoxicated drunkard. Sometimes to the left, and sometimes to the right.

It was a really weird situation. When he remembered it now it seemed like a joke. Of course, it had seemed like a

joke to him even then. It was natural to think it was a joke. Because you first saw a wild pigeon on a branch of a row of trees with drooping canopies. The very next moment, the small bird became a bounding simian—it too vanished in a moment and turned into a withered tree branch. You rubbed your eyes and then saw that there was nothing. No row of trees, no wild pigeon, no monkey—no withered branch either. How strange—there was nothing in front actually. Only vast fields of kush grass stretching for krosch after krosch. There was no village on the horizon, nor were there anything like woods in sight; the expanse of the terrain simply stretched on and on, the skyline lost in greyness.

Shyamango was lying in the shade of the ashwath with his eyes shut and remembering his experience. He

realised that even death had not been an impossibility. He was indeed fortunate that a band of travellers had spotted him from afar just in time. He remembered nothing of when he fell on the ground, when the band of travellers rushed towards him, and how they nursed him back to consciousness.

The middle-aged man came up to him and asked, "I hope you are feeling well now?"

Shyamango hadn't been able to find the words to express his gratitude for so long. Now he said, "You people saved my life—I don't know how I can express my gratitude..."

"Forget that, none of that now—just rest." The middle-aged traveller said, with a tone of deep affection.

The leaves of the ashwath rustled in the Choitro breeze. Shyamango's eyes

shut again as he listened to the sound. It occurred to him that the middle-aged traveller was worrying about him unnecessarily. He was completely well now. He thought to stand up, but the very next moment he thought, where's the need to trouble the middle-aged man, what's the harm in resting some more? Let the man return from the riverbank in the meanwhile.

The middle-aged traveller came up to him again and sat down. He asked, "Do you want to accompany us?"

Shyamango could not figure out what he ought to do. A little while back, another companion of the middle-aged man had asked him the same question. He hadn't been able to say anything then either. The group was heading southwards by boat, towards Baanpur—while he had to go to Rajatpat, on the bank of the Aatreya. He considered accompanying them for some of the way. He would have to be on the road all by himself after that. He was candid with the middle-aged man. He said, "You know my destination, you tell me what I ought to do—you are an elder, please advise me."

Perhaps the middle-aged man would say something. But the man

later, when you return home, you'll find it very difficult. That's also a matter of concern."

That was true. If he really had to go southwards with the flow of the Punarbhaba river, then he would have to get off the boat midway and travel a great distance by foot. And that route was completely forested.

Before Shyamango could decide whether or not he should go, the band of travellers had left the shade of the ashwath. Resting against a youth's shoulder, Shyamango walked slowly to the riverbank. There was a tree there as well, a banyan. Shyamango sat down beneath it and looked all around; there wasn't merely a single shady tree but several of them. He surmised that the residents of the Punarbhaba bank were decent folk. He liked the place. The resting place was lovely.

A white cow was grazing on the other bank—a dark-skinned girl was running after two baby goats. The river current was very gentle. The boats at the bank were afloat yet still. It didn't seem that a waterway was flowing beneath them.

Without any further delay, the travellers boarded the boat. It was

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who had been dispatched to the riverbank came running just then. He informed them that a boat was leaving very soon for their destination.

Those who were stretched out beneath the ashwath jumped up and began getting ready for the journey. The middle-aged man too was a bit fidgety. Nonetheless, he asked, "Will you come along with us?"

Shyamango could not respond this time either.

Finally, the middle-aged man himself declared, "I don't feel like leaving you alone like this and going away. And if I take you along, then

difficult to say why they were anxious. Because it didn't seem that the boat would leave very soon.

This is an excerpt from the translation of the Bangla novel, *Prodoshe Prakrito Jon* (originally published 1984), by author Shawkat Ali.

Translated by V. Ramaswamy

V. Ramaswamy, along with Shahroza Nahrin, translated *Life and Political Reality: Two Novellas* by Shahidul Zahir.

ESSAY

Spectacularised rape

NADINE SHAANTA MURSHID

In the psyche and schema of the average transnational Bangladeshi, rape is visible and legitimate only when it takes spectacular forms—violent, brutal, deadly. I argue that this is a nationalist rendering of rape that is retained in Bangladesh and its diaspora to maintain the image of the valiant and brave Bangladeshi male freedom fighter who fought Pakistan to liberate his nation, his motherland, and indeed, his mother, cementing the role of men as protectors of women's honor. Meanwhile, it maintains the honour of the Birangona, keeping her sacrifice alive in the memory of Bangladeshis. In doing so, the problem of "manush ki bolbe", because what is there to say when one experiences such violent rape, is resolved to produce another: rape is visible only when it mimics the rape of the Birangonas. Structures of feeling make spectacular rape victims/survivors deserving of humanity, although justice is frequently elusive, while the humanity of those whose rape is quiet, is thinned, as they remain under the purview of the social norm-enforcing refrain of "manush ki bolbe". And in other instances, when rape co-occurs with other forms of violence, rape is erased altogether to surface more palatable, nonsexual forms of violence.

To illustrate what the spectacularisation of rape looks like, and the effect it has on producing an understanding of rape, I provide some examples.

In a 2023 stage production of Nilima Ibrahim's *Ami Birangona Bolchi* by Syed Jamil Ahmed, the relentless hardship and adversity that the Birangonas experienced in 1971 and beyond were enacted on stage. This modern stage production with seven narratives centered the anguish, pain, and importantly, resilience of the Birangonas. However, that resilience was marked by the brutality of their experiences as each of the women articulated the enduring shame that was imposed on them as victims/survivors of wartime rape. An audience member that I spoke with termed the trauma on display as *too loud*. Another used the word 'hahakar', or despair, to describe what she witnessed. Indeed, rape, presented as all-encompassing and traumatic, reproduced the spectacularised version of rape that we are already familiar with, a version that is increasingly difficult to consume and triggering for a populace with a range of trauma history. Still, such a representation of rape, I argue, makes rape in interpersonal relationships difficult to spot, muddying the difference between rape and sex.

In the 2011 film *Guerilla*, by Nasiruddin Yousuf, we meet Bilqis Banu, who embodies multiple roles of "wife, mother, insurgent, combatant, and ultimately martyr" after her husband disappears when he joins the Liberation War (Chowdhury, 2022). In this rare representation of a female warrior, we find an alternative perspective in which the woman is not reduced



ILLUSTRATION: MAISHA SYEDA

to the oppressor's brutality. But that perspective is lost, much like her life, when the threat of rape emerges, to which she responds with murder-suicide. The audience is left with the idea that it is more dignified to take your own life than be raped, for to be sexually violated means to be reduced to the violence endured. Indeed, it is only sexual oppression that has the totalising power to reduce women to their experience of oppression.

In 2024, a Bangladeshi heavy-metal band, Cryptic Fate, popular among middle-class youth, released an album to pay homage

to Bangladesh's Liberation War. The album, titled *Noy Mash*, a clever play on the nine-month war evocative of a mother that bears a child for nine months, consists of nine songs in which the band travels back in time to inspire Bangalis to rise and fight against oppression so that the nation can be birthed. The Birangona does not feature at all. The only feminised subject is the mother, interchangeable with the motherland, whose freedom is at stake. However, her only acknowledged suffering is in the form of anxiety in waiting for her warrior son to return home. "Kedona

ma", one of the songs cajoles before going into the chorus, "Jachhi judhho joy korte", perhaps to claim a victory narrative to subvert the ubiquitous victimhood narrative that surrounds Bangladesh's Liberation War.

In the public consciousness, I argue, rape is either made absent by such representations, which makes it appear unimportant and marginal to the grand war narrative, or it turns women into traumatised bodies, mutilated, or dead, to be pitied by others. No one knows that better than a woman who has experienced rape. And that is why

women, such as my interlocutors, use silence to protect themselves, as does the state. While women's use of silence can be seen as agentic, the state's cannot. For instance, the military regimes of Zia and Ershad between 1975 and 1990 went silent on the topic of the Birangonas, ostensibly to protect and affirm a masculinist reading of history that focused on the role of male freedom fighters, warriors, many of whom had become members of the Bangladesh Army and/or the government. In doing so, the state sidelined and marginalised both the role that women played during the Liberation War and the effect of that war on women. It is that oppression of silence that would produce the activism of the 1990s while making rape taboo even in discourse about wartime violence, keeping alive a pursuit for "shothik itishash", or correct history, amid textbook politics and state-sponsored silencing tactics that make Bangladesh's history a site of contestation (Mohaiemen 2020).

This is an excerpt from "Chapter 5: Birangona—The Blueprint for How Rape Is Viewed" from *Intimacies of Violence: Reading Transnational Middle-Class Women in Bangladeshi America* (Oxford University Press, 2024).

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