

“It was not rape – it was war”

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Book Review

- Nayanika Mookherjee (2016). *The Spectral Wound: Sexual Violence, Public Memories and the Bangladesh War of 1971* (with a foreword by Veena Das). New Delhi: Zubaan. 325 pp. Rs. 795/-. (First published Duke University Press, 2015)
- Essar Batool, Ifrah Butt, Samreena Mushtaq, Munaza Rashid, Natasha Rather (2016). *Do You Remember Kunan Poshpora?* New Delhi: Zubaan. 228 pp. Rs. 395/- (Zubaan Series on Sexual Violence and Impunity in South Asia)
- V. Geetha (2016). *Undoing Impunity: Speech after Sexual Violence*. New Delhi: Zubaan. 305 pp. Rs. 695/- (Zubaan Series on Sexual Violence and Impunity in South Asia)

The three books under review speak to the realities of speech, voice and memory after sexual violence in three troubled moments of sub-continental history of the present. They speak to different but not dissimilar contexts – Kashmir, Bangladesh, and South Asia (with a relatively stronger focus on India, through a threading together of various different episodes spread out over time and space).

These are stories of suffering and pain that we know of; stories around which campaigns have been built, that have been discussed/investigated/prosecuted/represented through creative and performative expressions as part of feminist and human rights campaigns in South Asia. And yet, they ask searing questions about how much we really understand about the realities of rape in the futures survivors carry themselves into. There is also an attempt to grapple with the complexities of human rights and feminist fact-finding and what that may entail for the survivor especially in terms of her interiority and her dwelling within herself, her family, her neighbourhood/community – as for instance Nayanika Mookherjee’s question whether “speaking/having voice can alone be healing” (NM: 12) Finally, the testimonies on impunity that these women offer through their experience. In the words of human rights defender Khurram Pervez, “Impunity flows from the fact that there is no law [in Kashmir], especially for the occupying forces. There is only the lawlessness of military occupation” (cited in 170-71).

Do you remember Kunan Poshpora is the story of one night in two villages in Kashmir – a night 24 years long that began on 23-24 February 1991 “that holds stories of violation, injustice, oppression and falsehood, as well as acts of courage, bravery and truth” (Essar et. al.: 1). From the official records, 125 men were involved in the operations at Kunan Poshpora (for a nominal roll of men see Essar et. al.: 96-97). While patriarchy is the “governing principle of the lives of women...the silences of occupation are even more deafening” (3), making the convergence of private and public patriarchy (to use Yakin Erturk’s words) lethal for women in Kashmir.

“That one night has become my life. No matter what I do, where I go or what I think. That night never leaves me. It’s with me all the time, when I pray, when I cook, when I clean myself. I curse the, (the army) all the time and will curse them

all my life. People console me. They say you must forget and move on..." (Essar et. al.: 85).

The sexual assault of women in Kunan Poshpora was part of a longstanding use of rape as punishment for rising against military occupation (Essar et. al.: 52); the flip side of this is that in a deeply patriarchal society that ostracises women who have been sexually assaulted, the anticipation of rape deterred men from joining the militant movement (Essar et. al.: 56). Whichever way one looks at it, what is clear is that rape has been a weapon of war and terror in Kashmir, affecting women and men in very different ways, those who witnessed/survived the assault and their children:

"We are not respected by people...They (people of other villages) don't allow us to sit with them or even to get close to them. It's not only limited to schools or college, we are looked down upon by people everywhere...They say your mothers and sisters were raped" (Essar et. al.: 109).

In going back to recover the memory of that long night and painstakingly piecing together every shred of evidence and recall available to them, searching for the restoration of a semblance of justice, Essar, Ifrah, Samreena, Munaza and Natasha find that

"[t]he journey throughout the case has been just like the road leading to Kunan Poshpora: serpentine, full of uncertain turns, surrounded by hope, the destination constantly elusive...There still remains a great deal to do, a long road to travel, to explore any and every avenue of making India and its Armed Forces accountable for their endless crimes in Jammu and Kashmir" (Essar et. al.: 191).

The question of impunity and the use of rape as a weapon of war in areas of militarized conflict in a context of occupation, has different echoes, resonances and consequences in a context where a war of liberation – a *muktijuddho* – is being fought, as in the case of the Bangladesh. Nayanika Mookherjee sets out through her carefully crafted account of sexual violence and public memories of the Bangladesh War of 1971, the complexities is understanding the event (ghotona) and the construction of subjectivities when the "wound" of history is signalled through the body of the raped woman (NM: 9). Using "wound" to "literally refer to the physical and social injuries through which different Bangladeshi publics identify, circulate, know, and imagine the iconic figure of the birangona" (NM: 10), Mookherjee provides a reading of the Bangladesh War and its aftermath that triangulates narratives of survivors, visual, literary and state representations and human rights testimonies (NM: 6).

Methodologically, she argues that the ethnography of sexual violence needs to sidestep a linear, flat account of sexual violence and "institutionalized memory" and move towards "an enmeshed, intertwined, and imbricated web of narratives from every available source" with a mindfulness towards the conditions under which testimonies are produced (NM: 15-17) -- public memory, public secrecy, absence-presence and combing (searching and hiding) (NM: 26).

Spectral Wound focuses on conversations with four survivors – Moyna, Kajoli, Rohima and Rashida - and their families – "talkable" narratives dismissed as nonsense by researchers in search of the "real thing" (NM: 57):

“Can we talk of our own history? Isn’t this a shameful thing? *Man ijgot* [honour and status] is the most important thing. It is possible to talk of history if we get something. But all that people have done is to ‘do meeting’ about us. Otherwise it would be my own imagination in my own body...The history of my body is linked with my son Karim” (Kajoli in NM: 55).

But the experience of the documentary process and giving public testimony cannot be homogenised for all survivors, as is evident from Rashida’s observation that “a weight would have been lifted if she had been able to speak about it” (NM: 65). However, speech is also hedged with power and the women must negotiate the complex interconnections between public secrecy in the village, disclosure within national settings and the resulting transgressions/scorn at the level of the village (NM: 89).

A central argument in Mookherjee’s account of 1971 and post-war history is that efforts by left-liberal activists drawing on statist ideas to document the experiences and images of raped women (in some cases flattening out/even distorting stories to fit them to form) with the promise of material compensation, contributes to a pathological public sphere that feeds on these detailed accounts of the “real” experience of rape (NM: 65) as the only validation of her position as a true birangona. Imageries that draw on this construction, she observes, while fulfilling the women’s role of “victimhood for the nation”, are embedded in middle-class sensibilities (NM: 246-47). The finely calibrated, intricately intermeshed weaving of the past with the present, of the ghotona with relationship, neighbourhood, village, livelihoods and suffering that the women provided in their accounts are effaced even while they figure as a dominant presence – an “absent presence” - in the public imaginary.

“Across our geographies, the social meanings invested in the violated woman’s body on the one hand and her so-called ‘character’ on the other precede and frame understanding and prove decisive in determining what she deserves: justice or the horrific violence she was subject to. In itself, sexual violence is not seen as problematic” (V. Geetha: 3)

V. Geetha’s account of impunity and sexual violence draws on moments from the modern history of India and South Asia, reflecting on the experiences of resisting and seeking justice for survivors of sexual assault across a range: Phulmoni and the Age of Consent debates, Tebhaga, Constituent Assembly debates, Partition narratives, armed resistance (Kashmir, Sri Lanka, Naxalbari), Pakistan and the Hudood ordinances, Dalit Panthers in Maharashtra, punitive rape in caste society, Gujarat 2002 and the areas in north-east India under the Armed Forces Special Powers Act, among others.

In panning the fields of sexual assault and impunity in South Asia through a close look at specific histories and legal trajectories, *Undoing Impunity* “is not only about the nature of State authority, but about what thwarts and indicts it” for, “unless we ‘remember’ the history of this thwarting, even as we do keep alive the memory of State and social violence, we would be doing grave injustice to our capacity for hope and faith in justice” (VG: xxxi). As in Mookherjee’s account, Geetha dwells on the ways in which the trauma and anomie produced by sexual aggression are not speakable and “invoked only to be relegated to the margins of collective memory” (VG: 9) – the victim bearing the humiliation without the dignity of a sufferer and the perpetrator tolerated and never fully brought to justice.

Speaking of the radical counter-narratives on sexual violence that thwart the impunity of the dominant/state authority at different historical moments that Geetha refers to, the writing of Dr. Ambedkar and Tarabai Shinde for instance locates precisely for us the source of impunity in ideologies of the family in Hindu society. Legislative intervention (for instance around the Age of Consent) in colonial India, however, continued to assume a moral as distinct from a legal frame of reference, which drew on patriarchal morality. In the context of the recovery of abducted women after the Partition of 1947, even while working on state directives to recover women leaving their children behind, the women engaged in this project were acutely aware of the emotional and political difficulties this entailed. But yet, this critical reflection could not lead to speaking about sexual violence that was foundational to the birth of the two Nation-States, because there were not public/political registers to do this. The accounts in personal narratives and fiction therefore remain just that, posing no challenge to the power of the state to erase the continuing realities of sexual violence and its aftermath (VG: 72). The naxalite movement in independent India foregrounds the disjunctures between peasant and urban male activist understandings of sexual violence:

“[o]ften peasant women were ruthlessly sexually exploited in those villages. It was very surprising to us that neither they themselves, nor their husbands ever urged us to take any revenge for that. They were far more occupied with the issue of capturing land. Sexual honour was important to us, but was not a priority to them” (Sinha Roy cited in VG: 107).

Memory, re-telling, speech/voice, trauma, wounds, harm, suffering, justice, recovery, dignity, healing, encoding bodies through violence – in the context of collective and targeted sexual assault (also importantly as state practice) and the meanings of ‘honour’ – individual, collective, national. The concerns overlap: The central question is one of method. How does one re-tell the stories of unimaginable violence in the everyday and in war, embedded alike in discourses of nation and state building? How does track the combing, opening out to view the erasures and the intractable as well as conscious ways in which women are disappeared from the narratives on sexual violence? What is the place of law in social recognition of suffering? What is the place of ethics in the ethnography of sexual violence, or what might be the contours of an ethical re-telling?

The challenge before feminists especially is to change the frames within which sexual violence unfolds in the everyday – dismantling the misogynistic essentialising narratives of the violated female body that strengthen practices of impunity.