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Special Issue of Journal of Material Culture

Aesthetics, Politics, Conflict

The raped woman as a horrific sublime and the Bangladesh war of 1971

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**Abstract:** This article examines the relationship between aesthetics and politics when invoking the imagery of war-time rape. It explores the prevalent way in which the raped woman of the Bangladesh war of 1971 is imagined in contemporary Bangladesh through the circulation of rumours, narratives of encounters and photographs. In 1971, faced with a large number of rape survivors after the war, the Bangladeshi government publicly designated any woman raped in the war a *birangona* (meaning brave woman/*war-heroine*). Over the last forty years in Bangladesh, there exists a public memory of wartime rape through various literary, visual and testimonial forms. These aesthetic representations of the war-heroine can be understood through Rancière's (2006) politics by other means - of that of the distribution of the sensible - through the horrific sublime figuration of the *birangona*. As an idea which is not readily apparent, these diverse oral, visceral and visual strategies make the *birangona* visible and comprehensible as *bhoyonkor* (horrific). The figuration of the *birangona* as a horrific sublime also brings to the surface Lyotard's formulation of the 'encoding' - the underlying moral values and judgment - that are implicit in the feelings that enable the readability of the war-heroine. I interrogate these hegemonic affective aesthetics (the way wartime rape is often narrowly described) through a

nuanced ethnographic account of the *birangona*'s life trajectory. This less categorised, non-semiotic figuration (Pinney 2001) of the *birangona* is the interventionary mode, politics - in Rancière's formulation - through which this idea of the horrific sublime can be disrupted.

**Keywords:** sexual violence, war, rumours, photographs, sublime

After the war, my father saw thousands of raped women standing still, back to back, against a truck. Not a hair moved among them and there was no sign of life in their eyes. They were mute, with deadened-eyes like Qurbani (sacrificial) cattle. Whenever I utter the word *birangona* I invariably think of that image. (Gazi 2014)

In 2013 a London-based theatre company announced its intention to stage a play - *Birangona: Women of War* - in UK and Bangladesh based on the testimonies collected from a group of poor *birangonas* (women who were raped during the Bangladesh war of 1971) in Sirajganj, Bangladesh. The quote here focuses on the director's memory of her father narrating stories about mute, faceless *birangonas* which inspired this staging. The play also begins with the quote: 'My father once told me he had witnessed hundreds of them standing back-to-back on a convoy of trucks like sacrificial animals.' That the narrative of the father's encounter with the *birangonas* enabled the creation of an embedded imaginary of the war-heroine in the author's mind is also evident from this excerpt. But who are the *birangonas* and how are they predominantly known in Bangladesh?

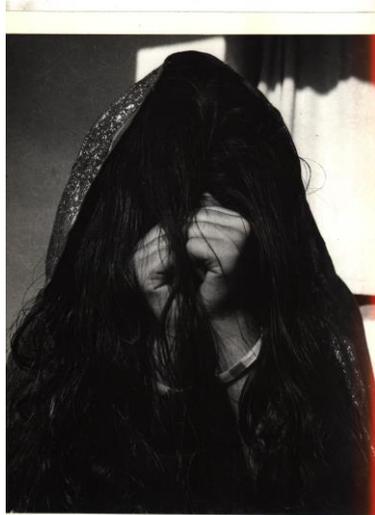
In December 1971, East Pakistan became the independent nation of Bangladesh after a nine month war with West Pakistan and their local Bengali collaborators and rape was common during this conflict. Faced with a huge population of rape survivors, the new Bangladeshi government in December 1971 – six days after the end of the war - publicly designated any woman raped in the war a *birangona* (meaning brave or courageous woman - the Bangladeshi state uses the term to mean *war-heroine*). Even today, the Bangladeshi government's bold, public effort to refer to the women raped during 1971 as *birangonas* is internationally unprecedented, yet it remains unknown to many besides Bangladeshis. It is important

to note that the Bangladeshi press did fall silent on the *birangonas* until between 1973 and the 1990s, as did the government. The issue of wartime rape has however remained on the public stage, as a topic of literary and visual media (films, plays, photographs) since 1971 till today. Yet there were hardly any testimonial accounts of *birangonas* and their experiences. In 1992, three poor *birangonas* were photographed in a civil society movement demanding the trial of collaborators. So since the 1990s, the political trajectory of the *birangona* assumed a new form as the Bangladeshi press started reporting on rape during 1971 again from the 1990s. A large number of Bangladeshi feminist and human rights organisations also started documenting the testimonies of *birangonas* as oral history accounts so as to bring to justice those Bengali men who collaborated with the Pakistani army in perpetrating the rapes and deaths in 1971. In the late 1990s, a famous sculptor publicly acknowledged that she had been raped during the war and has emerged as a protagonist demanding the setting up of a war crimes tribunal and trial of collaborators.

Since 2001, a large number of women have come forward acknowledging their experience of wartime rape in 1971, and quite a few changes have taken place in the representation of the public memories of wartime rape. These changes are part of left-liberal activists' attempts to rethink and rewrite 1971 in Bangladesh. In 2009, the International War Crimes Tribunal was set up to try individuals for their role of collaboration during the Bangladesh war in 1971. One allegation of sexual violence has been testified to in court: in 2012, a woman spoke against one of the accused, Abdul Kader Mollah.<sup>1</sup> So, for over the last forty years in Bangladesh, there exists a public memory of wartime rape through various literary, visual (films, plays, photographs) and testimonial forms, ensuring that the raped woman endured as an iconic figure.

Doing my research in the late 1990s, on the public memories of wartime rape during the Bangladesh war of 1971 (Mookherjee 2015), I would come across various personal accounts of war among a large number of people in cities, in suburban towns and villages, which would feature ‘knowing’ a woman who had been raped in 1971, ‘who lived next door’, ‘in the same road’, ‘in the neighbouring locality/village’. The woman in question would always be remembered through the *bhoyonkor drishsho* (horrific scene) marked by her ‘dishevelled hair’, ‘her loud laughter’, or her ‘quietness’, ‘muteness’, ‘the one who stares into space,’ with ‘deadened-eyes’ (Gazi 2014). These descriptions would often end with the phrase – *she ki bhoyonkor drishsho* (what a horrific scene it was). Apart from encountering the raped woman after the war, there would be various narrations as to which women were where during the war and how long they were staying ‘away’ at an ‘uncle’s’ place after the war, the latter signifying the possibility of the woman becoming pregnant as a result of being raped during the war. Suspicion, speculation about the possibility of young and attractive women being raped during 71 is rife in the rumours of the post-war whereabouts of these women.

These oft-cited post-war rumours and encounter narratives with the raped women and the formation of an idea of the *birangona* resonates powerfully with the famous ‘oi chuler chobi’ (that hair photograph) of a war-heroine, depicted by the open hair and pair of bangle-clad fists covering a woman’s face (Fig 1). In an interview



**Fig\_1. 'That *Birangona* hair photograph' by Naibuddin Ahmed**

with the photographer Naibuddin Ahmed who had taken this photograph, he narrated that this image was smuggled out of Bangladesh and was first published in *Washington Post* (Masud 1998) which also drew international attention to the events of the Bangladesh war. In April-May 2008, this photograph was chosen to be the last image to mark the end of a photographic exhibition in London titled, 'Bangladesh 1971.' This photograph of the war-heroine, with her open hair and fists covering a woman's face is the visual trace of the raped woman of 1971. The caption of the photograph was: 'One of the estimated 400,000 *birangona*, meaning 'brave women', who were raped during the war'.<sup>2</sup> The novelist Tahmima Anam (author of *Golden Age* 2007), writing in *The Guardian* on 10<sup>th</sup> April 2008, described this photograph to be: 'one of many haunting images that make up Bangladesh 1971 (Anam 2008). While the staging of the play *Birangona* draws upon the memory of the director's father (as mentioned above), the play announces it is narrating untold stories of victimized women (inspite of the presence of an extensive documentation undertaken by Bangladeshis). Choosing to stage primarily the state of the women in the rape camps and freeze their identities as only raped, ensured the *birangona* remained as - what I argue - a horrific sublime: the ruptured figure who can be subconsciously internalised

and imagined as one marked only by the horror of the violence of rape. It is also not surprising that the production team of the play *Birangona* also chose ‘that hair photograph’ as their poster.

The omnipresence of rape in various conflicts has made it imperative to ‘recover’ and document voices of survivors in attempting to seek justice for these unresolved genocidal crimes. But often this redemptive and emancipatory aesthetics and politics like the play *Birangona* ascribes a permanently raped and *bhoyonkor* (horrific) status to a war-heroine and hence fails to highlight how she has lived with the horror of wartime rape in independent Bangladesh. This article examines the relationship between aesthetics and politics with regard to the usage of the imagery of war-time rape. It explores how the imaginary of the raped woman of the Bangladesh war of 1971 exist in contemporary Bangladesh through the flow and circulation of forms. This affective aesthetic, the article argues, emerges through an intertextual circulation of a horrific sublime – the rupture that is engendered through the various encounters, rumours and photographs of the women. As a wild and threatening sight she creates anxiety as it is not possible to categorise her in this unsayable zone of excess determined by an already known discourse about the *birangona*. To evoke the political potential and limits of this horrific sublime in relation to the *birangona*, the paper explores Rancière’s politics by other means, the distribution of the sensible through which aesthetics is made known to sense perceptions. This distribution of the sensible however needs to be understood in conjunction with the ‘structure of feelings’ (Williams 1977: 132-3) which is ‘methodologically’ an attempt to understand feelings, rhythms within their specific socio-political socializations. It is these socialities and socializations which make the sensible known to sense perceptions.

As a horrific sublime, the figuration [Lyotard 1994 (1971)] of the *birangona* – how her intensity is felt and thereby coded and made readable - occurs in two ways. The article explores first, the recuperative restoration that follows the rupture as a marker of Kant’s idea of the terrifying sublime accompanied by dread or melancholy: the way the anxiety about the *birangona* is rationalised, is made possible by ensuring the *birangona* continues to be a horrific sublime. Burke’s (1757) identifies terror as the source of sublime and that it is productive of the strongest emotion of pain which the mind is capable of feeling. In the case of the horrific figuration of the *birangona* terror is generated through the vastness and far reaching implications of the event of rape which adds to the affective impact of the horrific *birangona*. I explore these affective experiences further by following Williams’ (1977) ‘structure of feelings’ as well as Sara Ahmed’s (2004) dictum of contextualising these feelings within past histories of what is already known and hence perceived. At the same time and secondly, the sublime figure of the *birangona* brings out the unsayable but already felt and known discourse about the wartime rape. Here Lyotard’s formulation of ‘encoding’ [Lyotard 1994 (1971); Bennington 2008: 171] of the *birangona* as a horrific sublime also highlights underlying moral values and judgment, the ambiguity that exists towards the figure of the war-heroine.

The essay also suggests interventionary modes, politics - in Rancière’s formulation - through which this idea of the *birangona* as a horrific sublime can be disrupted and enables a critique of the pervasive form of political and cultural hegemony through which wartime rape is often described. Rancière describes politics as an aesthetic activity through which subjects are formed (Rancière 2006). I argue, however, that the idea of politics linked to the woman raped during 1971 lies in disrupting this hegemonic aesthetic narrative of the horrific sublime. The key to

subject formation of the *birangona* lies in a less categorised, non-semiotic idea of figuration (Pinney 2001) through a nuanced ethnographic account of her life trajectory. In this context, it is important to ask how we can know of Rancière's 'political' where the dissensus itself is reconfigured by the distribution of the sensible or 'the police' - the bureaucratic orchestration of the social order. Given that the horrific sublime is too hegemonic to be genuinely 'political' in the case of the *birangona* in Bangladesh, I argue we need a different way of thinking about the political. We can do this by desisting from defining the *birangona* in pre-existing categories which fit an imaginary of what a raped woman of 1971 is supposed to be.

### **The circulation of 'that hair photograph' and its publics**

In 1947, with the independence of India from the British colonial rule, a sovereign homeland for the Muslims of India was created in the eastern and north-western corners of the subcontinent as West and East Pakistan. In the formation of Pakistan, Islam was the sole principle of nationhood, separated not only geographically but by sharp cultural and linguistic differences. Successive governments in Pakistan embarked on a strategy of forcible cultural assimilation towards the Bengalis. Resistance to this program, and more generally to West Pakistani administrative, military, linguistic, civil and economic control, culminated in a nine-month-long liberation war in 1971 which resulted in the formation of Bangladesh. The creation of Bangladesh in 1971 coincided with the death of 3 million people and rape of 200,000 women (according to official figures and these numbers are contested<sup>3</sup>) by the West Pakistani army and local Bengali collaborators.

In 1972, the independent government of Bangladesh also set up Rehabilitation Centres, for these women and referred to them as *birangonas* (war-heroines) with the attempt to reduce social ostracism. The effort by the new Bangladeshi government to

publicly present (whether successfully or not) women raped during 1971 as ‘war-heroines’ remains internationally unprecedented. This rehabilitation programme undertook abortions of the *birangonas*, placed their children for international adoption, arranged their marriages, trained them in vocational skills and/or gave them government jobs (Mookherjee 2007). As mentioned before, the issue of rape during the war has however prevailed over the last forty years through literary and visual representations and in the last twenty years as oral history testimonial forms as documented by the Bangladeshi press, activists, academics and filmmakers.

Ariella Azoulay (2008) in her compelling work on the political and ethical status of photography describes the power relations that sustain and make possible photographic meanings. She argues that anyone - even a stateless person - who addresses others through photographs or is addressed by photographs can become a member of the citizenry of photography. It is the civil contract of photography which she argues enables anyone to pursue political agency and resistance through photography. The famous ‘that hair photograph’ is often identified by such resistance and political agency as well as being symbolic of shame, purdah, trauma and anonymity.

This photograph is first found accompanying articles emphasizing the need of rehabilitation of the *birangona* (*Purbodesh* 26/3/72) after the war. Thereafter, it can be found in various newspapers through 1972 till 1973 including the Genocide Issue of *Banglar Bani* published in December 1972. Thus in terms of its audience and publics, the photograph was widely viewed right after the war by those having access to newspapers in urban and rural areas and stood in for a description of the raped woman. This photograph again re-emerges in the 1990s in books documenting wartime rape during 1971 and in newspapers revisiting this theme during the annual

commemorative events of the war. In due course, this photograph has been republished as book covers, posters and made part of museums, exhibitions. Rather than Azoullay's (2008) argument about the resistive idioms emanating from photographs, these reproductions generate varied meanings, particularly through the contexts of citation of the photograph. The different contexts and its audience include: Ahmed's photograph, the image in the *Washington Post*, in Bangladeshi newspapers in the 1970s accompanying articles seeking rehabilitation of *birangonas*, in contemporary newspapers commemorating the war and in international exhibitions. The repetitive account mentioned earlier of the encounter with the raped woman also seems to have intertextually entered the photograph and vice versa. By intertextual, I refer to the intertwined, circulatory traces of discourses, symbols and images which cross-reference each other in different texts, contexts and times. If we follow Burke (1757) and understand sublime as the coming together of the terror of the vastness of the event of rape, then Gilbert-Rolfé's (1999) association of the sublime with technology also applies here. The multiple intertextual access that various audiences have to the birangona creates this horrific sublime.

Various literate individuals in urban and rural areas would remind me of this photograph when I described what my research was concerned with. In various instances, a narration of the encounters with the raped women would include a reference to the photograph: 'Have you seen 'that famous hair photograph'? Of the raped woman covering her face with her fist and hair? The women we saw looked very much like that. I feel a shudder even thinking and remembering about it.' This photograph here is linked with experiential, subjective, affective and embodied interrelationships. The photograph, its audience and publics is thus intertwined with the external matrix of conditions and presuppositions - the encounters and rumours -

for its readability. This image is thereby not able to deliver its message alone, but it is extra photographic, an ‘incomplete utterance’ (Sekula 1982: 85). To these various literate audiences, the dishevelled hair of the raped woman signals what might be perceived by the viewer - like the ‘encounters’, rumours mentioned earlier - as that of the *bhoyonkor*, animalistic (like the sacrificial cattle) state of the woman after the rape, ‘the only image one thinks of when referring to the *birangona*’ (Gazi 2014), the image ‘which contribute to its powerful visual retelling of the story of this war.’ (Anam 2008). These oft-cited post-war encounter narratives with the raped women not only resonate powerfully with the famous ‘that hair photograph.’ The way various people referred to the photograph, shows how that *bhoyonkor drishsho* - horrific image and scene - allows them to make sense of their own engagement with the horrors of the war.

This hair photograph can also be found in the Liberation War Museum in Dhaka (Mookherjee 2011: S82). All other exhibits in the Museum are accompanied by an English and Bengali text – however, there is no Bengali translation of the text accompanying the ‘hair photograph’, which creates a certain amount of bewilderment and confusion among some of the audience. In the museum, the text in English beneath this image highlights the ambiguity that surrounds the issue of wartime rape:

For the most part, this issue has been brushed aside, since it requires us to look within ourselves, at the strictures and structures of our own society as well as to condemn the brutality of the other. Clearly the ambiguous figure of the *birangona* (the shamed one) cannot be easily contained within a generalized glorious narrative of the nation.

The very reference to the war-heroine as the ambiguous figure as well as the shamed one seems to bring together the fascination and discomfort that exists towards the women. Young children accompanying me to the museum have asked me when they saw this image and the caption: ‘Why is she covering her face?’ ‘Why is she the shamed one? What have we done to her?’ Young men and women visiting the museum would often identify the photograph by having seen them in newspapers, films on ’71 and Hindi films (Mookherjee 2011: S82). In the museum itself, the photograph has generated questions among young men and women as to whether the perpetrators were the Pakistani or the Indian army? This has further led to reflections on whether one should support the Indian or Pakistani cricket team in an India-Pakistan cricket match, or whether it is okay to support Pakistan given that ’71 happened so many years ago? The ‘hair photograph’ and the horrific war-heroine here capture the imaginary through which the *birangona* is ‘known.’ Here images viewed in the museum have gained their recognizability and currency from photographs in newspapers commemorating the war, Bangladeshi and Hindi films depicting the conflict. While in museums, certain objects and their uniqueness, their lack of replication, give them their aura and authenticity, here the photograph predominantly has credence among its viewers for having been reproduced, for its status as the original of multiple, exact copies which are already in circulation elsewhere. The feeling of terror and the vastness of the event of the rape brings into play Gilbert-Rolfe’s (1999) formulation of the relationship between sublime and what I would reframe for this instance as the proliferation of different formats of intertextual technology.

References to the photograph also directed me to the presence of these visual and literary sources and the need to explore how they are interwoven with, determine

and contribute to the public recall and memory of the history of rape of 1971. If ‘the memory museum is mostly a visual one’ (Sontag 2004), what kind of recognition and meaning do these images legitimise? The various recollections of knowing and encountering the raped woman, through the visual and literary sources, point to the public presence of the raped woman as a war-heroine vis-à-vis the ambiguity that exist towards them as evident in the rumours.

In her essay ‘Has Anyone ever Seen a Photograph of a Rape?’ Azoulay (2008: 220) contends that ‘rape does not belong to the class of objects that cannot be seen themselves, but that can be seen only by means of objects that represent them or in which they are manifested.’ The ‘hair photograph’ and the raped woman are such manifestations. The ‘hair photograph’ has thereby provided visual form to a *bhoyonkor* event, making the subliminal social ambiguity of the raped woman sayable. We can now name the discursive object, the unrepresentable, shocking, sexually transgressed, unstable raped woman. This ‘hair image’ captures a mental concept – the terror of the vastness of the event of rape and the sublime of the horrific *birangona* - an idea that is not readily apparent but which these diverse oral, visceral and visual strategies make visible. As Azoulay (2008: 242) notes about rape: ‘Everybody’s talking about it, talking about its images as if they were here in front of us – present before the gaze – but the images are absent.’ In the case of Bangladesh the *birangona* animates the invisible images of rape and hence enables a consistent, unifying and limited representation of the raped woman as a horrifying sublime. These images animate an ambiguous pleasure - attracting and repelling the spectator at the same juncture. This is similar to how Azoulay (2008: 235) describes the visual arena as producing and exhibiting the female body ‘in the tension between sanctification and abandonment.’ This image has also enabled bringing the horrific

events of 1971 to the attention of international public in the 1970s as well as in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The decision to end the exhibition in London with this photograph is also telling of the iconic significance of this image and its role in standing in for the violent, history of Bangladesh. The ceaseless exchange of this visual economy across national and cultural boundaries and its technological intertextuality with other images of the terror of the vastness of rape has significantly contributed to the efficacy of this representation of the raped woman as a horrific sublime.

### **The horrific sublime: Its affective and ambiguous circuits**

*Amar ma birangana, amra tai aposhhina* (My mother is *birangona*, that is why we are relentless).

*Birangander hatiar, gorje uthuk arekbar* (Let the *birangona*'s weapon roar again)

On 5<sup>th</sup> February 2013 a popular movement called the Shahbagh movement started in Bangladesh to protest against the Bangladesh War Crimes Tribunal's ruling of life long imprisonment of a collaborator. Instead the activists demanded his execution. This movement spanning predominantly over February 2013 and March 2013 repeatedly invoked the *birangona* as a category of political certainty. The above quotes are some of the slogans<sup>4</sup> that were used by Shabagh activists when celebrating March 8, 2013—International Women's Day. Avery Gordon (1997: 8) writing about ghosts and haunting as a phenomenological and methodological tool argues that:

The ghost is a social figure and investigating it can lead to that dense site where history and subjectivity make a social life.

The *birangona* figure, invoked in images, testimonies and documents, and recently in the Shahbagh movement has emerged as such a powerful ghostly motif in Bangladesh. She is imbued with the symbolism of future possibility and hope, of the need to do something, of the call to justice and resistance and is central to political

action and imaginings. However, rather than focus on an ahistorical and unmediated ghostly presence which hints at past injustices, what becomes significant to explore here is the need for this narrative of the raped woman as a horrific figure within the historical and political trajectories of the Bangladeshi nation. This is a particularly pertinent question given that Bangladesh has been seeking justice against the collaborators who have perpetrated the rapes and the murders with the Pakistani army. Why is it that the imaginary through which the *birangona* is discursively comprehended is always suggestive of horrific potentialities whether it is through the encounters, rumours or photographs?

This is because her figuration [(Lyotard 1994 (1971))] as a horrific sublime enables her intensity to be felt and thereby coded and made readable in two ways. First, the recuperative restoration that follows the rupture as a marker of Kant's idea of the sublime, the way the anxiety about the *birangona* is rationalised, is made possible by ensuring the *birangona* continues to be a horrific sublime. The photograph of the war-heroine with the hair on her face trigger the haunted, seething presence of the raped woman and of the many women who have died as a result of war-time rape enable an endemic mourning. As a figure straddling the past and the present, life and death, presence and absence, the photograph sends a shudder among its audience (as mentioned before), and moves them affectively.<sup>5</sup>

This horrific figuration allows the raped woman to be felt affectively (rather than reflectively comprehended) by the younger generation in Bangladesh. The *birangona* is a horrific sublime by means of the circulation of her figuration through the photograph of Naibuddin Ahmed, accounts of encounters with the war-heroine after the war, rumour about the war heroines and the public presence of war-heroines in the 1990s. The war-heroine here emerges as a national story of an injury as a result

of the rape. Various literate audience and publics – liberation fighters, NGO workers, younger generations of university students - would not only talk about the shudder felt in responding to these images. Audiences in varied public circuits like those watching plays, visiting museums and exhibitions would also refer to their affective feeling of helplessness and pain for the violent experience of the raped woman. These texts and narrativisation as the involuntary memory traces trigger the affective charges that flow from them as sensual intensities through bodies. These sensual intensities are manifested through the visceral surge of pain, choking, stoppages, shudders and numbness. The *birangona* is thus made sensible, visible and hence affective by presenting her as a numbed and deadened, *bhoyonkor* (horrific) figure which creates a feeling of sensorial, embodied mutuality among Bangladeshis around the horrors of wartime rape during 1971. This involuntary embodied, sensuous and aesthetic experience is felt by the viewers as an intensely immediate and personal feeling. It is these affective circuits to which the figuration of the *birangona* owes its horrific sublime nature.

This figuration of the horrific *birangona* as the hegemonic affective aesthetic moves Bangladeshis to seek justice for the losses of 71 as a result of the rape and killings. This photograph itself carries within it the dimension of haunting as the resurgence of the past also consist anticipation for the future. Those who collaborated with the Pakistani army and were politically rehabilitated within Bangladesh were seen to be symbolic of the failure of the secular future of Bangladesh. The affective resonances of helplessness and pain for the *birangona* has been mobilised in contemporary Bangladesh by the left-liberal activist community to highlight the presence of the collaborator and the continued existence of the injury. The collaborator and the *birangona* are iconic figures in the public memory of 1971 and a

symbolic other to each : male and female, perpetrator and survivor, both public and both secret, both being memories of that past which are erupting and shaping the present. The figure of the raped woman has emerged as a protagonist voice through which Bangladeshis can call into question the nation project.

Yet to theorise affect as only a personal, corporeal and sensuous occurrence fails to identify how *certain* images become affect-intensive in the first place. Could the figure of the war-heroine become so over-associated with affect that she herself becomes the object of affective transfer, produced as a result of circulation?<sup>6</sup> In fact the affective responses to *birangona* cannot be understood only through a sensorial, visceral and embodied perception, as registers of affect are not universal, singular and ahistorical. To borrow Sara Ahmed's words, 'How the feelings feel in the first place may be tied to a past history of readings in the sense that the process of recognition (of this feeling or that feeling) is bound up with what we already know' (2004: 25), that is the socio-political socialization of these 'structure of feelings' (Williams 1977). Can we then talk about an affective 'habit' of responding to the war-heroine drawing from traces left inchoate in memory, sedimented as visceral registers?

The affective resonances of helplessness, pain towards the war-heroine enabled by the horrific genre and figure of the *birangona* is enmeshed in a web of circulation about the abducted, violated women and the fear of rape. Both these tropes have emerged in the past and within contemporary scholarship on migration and communal relations in Bangladesh, as a site of anxiety, an important mobilizing, organizing image (Das 2006: 32). Through the various texts, particularly the photograph, public renarrativisation of the history of rape, the figure of the *birangona* lingers for its contemporary audiences so as to repeat their presence and refuse to let this violent encounter be the past.

Gordon (1997) in extolling the virtues of haunting argues that:

Being haunted draws us affectively, sometimes against our will and always a bit magically into the structure of a feeling of a reality we come to experience, not as cold knowledge, but as a transformative recognition. (Gordon 1997: 8)

A focus on the Gordon's transformative recognition of haunting and how it 'pulls us affectively into the structure of feeling of a reality', the socio-political socializations of feelings (Williams 1977: 132-3) however misses out on the material and semiotic practices around these haunted figures. The second form in which the horrific sublime of the *birangona* manifests is how it brings out the unsayable but already felt and known discourse about the wartime rape. Azoulay reminds us to ask the question: under what legal, political, or cultural conditions does it become possible to see and to show disaster that befalls those who can claim only incomplete or nonexistent citizenship? Similarly, it is important to ask not what is affective, but why the horrific sublime of the raped woman moves Bangladeshis and comprises the 'sensible' which is thereby felt and recognised by the sense experience as affective? I take this question on by following Williams' (1977) 'structure of feelings' as well as Sara's (2004) dictum of contextualising these feelings within past histories of what is already known and hence perceived. Lyotard's formulation of 'encoding' [(Lyotard 1994 (1971); Bennington 2008: 171) of the *birangona* as a horrific sublime also highlights underlying moral values and judgment, the ambiguity that exists towards the figure of the war-heroine.

The injury of the war-heroine of 1971 has an affective resonance of helplessness, pain in various public circuits. However at the moment of invocation of the raped woman one also feels affectively against these women as is evident by the

ambiguity towards them prevalent in Bangladesh through the citation of the rumours. The lingering presence of the war-heroine reminds one of this disturbing past which has not been sorted. The injury of sexual violence of the raped woman needs to be kept alive to bring to trial various collaborators. Yet it is also a reminder of the transgressed sexuality of the woman and this generates an ambiguity and repulsion towards the war-heroines. That the publications of photographs of violent events generate, various ambiguous reactions and are not just replete with resistive idioms (Azoullay 2008), are evident in Taryn Simon's photograph of the actor Zahra Zubaidi in the final rape image in Brian De Palma's film *Redacted* (2007).<sup>7</sup> The film is based on the gang rape and murder of a 14 year-old Iraqi girl, Abeer Qasim Hamza, by U.S. soldiers outside Mahmudiya on March 12, 2006. Abeer's mother, father, and 6-year-old sister were murdered while she was being raped. After the soldiers took turns raping Abeer, she was shot in the head and her body was set on fire. Four American soldiers of the 502nd Infantry Regiment were convicted of crimes including rape, intent to commit rape, and murder. Since appearing in the film, Zahra however has received death threats from family members and criticism from friends and neighbors who consider her participation in the film to be pornography. In 2011, while Taryn Simon's photograph was on view at the Venice Biennale, Zahra Zubaidi was granted political asylum in the United States. Her legal defence cited the international exhibition of this photograph as a contributing factor to her endangerment.

Similar such ambiguity and repulsion is evident in the prevailing rumours I would come across in various instances. Here, these rumours as an anxiety-ridden iterative response are the sites of activation of popular memory and highlights an ambiguity towards the women raped. The rumours not only call into question the past: where the women were after the war. They also throw a spotlight of suspicion,

betrayal and deception on the present and future trajectory of the women about whom the rumours are narrated. This is because the rumours allude to the possibility that these women might have borne and nurtured a child in Bangladesh conceived as a result of rape by the Pakistani army. It is the triangulation of these rumours with the encounter narratives and photographs of the horrifying *birangona* which seduce one to imagine her only as a horrific sublime.

The *birangona* image is thus used within well-established political vocabularies in Bangladesh while simultaneously retaining its disrupting quality as a horrifying image. It is particularly significant to critically unpack this figuration of the *birangona* as a horrific sublime given the varied implications this figure of war heroine has in concrete terms. I ask the questions: How does such a disruptive and horrifying image come to be enfolded so comfortably into established political narratives and movements? How is that the *birangona* can be both folded into hegemonic narratives and remain unsettling? That the *birangona* can only be imagined as horrific affirms already existing ideas of the raped woman. Once she is imagined as horrific her story can again be reiterated in a horrifying genre. It is this assumption of the *birangona* as a horrific sublime which lead to what I refer to as narrative closure – imagining the *birangona* only as a horrific figure – and hence enables a narrative license – restaging her story only as a horrifying account. This is most visibly evident in the renarration of the life trajectories of *birangonas* by feminist and human rights accounts (Mookherjee 2003). Various human rights activists seek to horrify the oral history accounts of *birangonas* in order to stage what they deem to be a more ‘traumatic’ account so that it affectively moves the younger generation about the losses of 1971. Similarly by focusing only on the horrific violence of the rape camps, the *Birangona* play reiterate and freeze the *birangona* as a

horrific figure. All these figurations have widespread and deep impact in how Bangladeshi women and gender relations are comprehended in stereotypical ways by those with limited knowledge about Bangladeshi politics and history. To follow Ranciere, the image of the *birangona* thus functions as both politics and policy in ways in which it does not tell us how women have variously lived with this violent experience of rape. To comprehend this we need to go beyond the hegemony of dissensus.

### **Beyond the hegemony of dissensus**

In the staging of the play *Birangona* in London in 2013 - 2014, the theatre group recreated the narrative of the war-heroine by focusing on her happy, pastoral, romantic experiences before the rape and of confinement and rape in the camp. In the performance staged in Bangladesh the *birangonas* from Sirajganj were also invited to be part of the audience (Gazi 2014). In witnessing the staging of the horrific torture in the rape camps one of the *birangonas* fainted as she thought that the Pakistani army has returned. By not attempting to address what happened to the *birangona* after the rape, the play manages to ascribe a fixed identity on her of that of a raped woman only. Reviews of the play thereby predictably noted about the *birangonas*: ‘Some died as a result of their brutal treatment; those that survived were rejected by their families, ostracised by society.’<sup>8</sup> Without reference to the extensive research prevalent in Bangladesh (Akhtar et al 2001) about the life trajectories of *birangonas*, reviewers assumed that the theatre group was breaking through the silence and redressing the balance.

Over forty years after its independence, the issues of genocide and rape of the Bangladesh war remains internationally unacknowledged. As a result it has become imperative to ‘recover’, the ‘untold stories’ of wartime rape by means of various

aesthetic performances and oral history projects undertaken by Bangladeshi feminists and human rights activists in attempting to seek justice for these unresolved genocidal crimes. Going with Rancière's argument that politics consists in 'bringing on the stage new objects and subjects, in making visible that which was not visible, audible as speaking beings they who were merely heard as noisy animals,' then politics here constitutes in bringing to the surface the image and idea of the 'sacrificial cattle-like dead' *birangonas* as a horrific sublime and reified as the raped. In the mode of breaking the silence about wartime rape, this play would seem to be setting up Rancière's scenes of 'dissensus', disrupting prevalent silence and thereby is an aesthetic activity.

The 'therapeutic' and 'emancipatory' possibilities of aesthetic registers in representing violent past injustices should not however consign to oblivion the processes of standardization and silences that can become inherent in the artistic representation of violent pasts. Like in the play *Birangona*, the reiteration of the horrific *birangona* makes intervention possible – an intervention that is restricted by its imaginary of the horrific *birangona*. By showing the intertextual processes through which the *birangona* emerges as a horrific sublime in the rumours, encounters, photographs and performances related to the experiences of wartime rape, this article highlights the political contradiction that the aesthetic visibility of 71's wartime rape bring to the narrative signification. As I have shown in this paper, the *birangona* as a figure of horrific sublime, of affective transfer, also evokes 'structure of feelings' (Williams 1977). The Bangladeshi nation can then embody the feelings of loss of 71 through the figure of the war-heroine and seek justice for the past wrongs. It is this affective experience that gives rise to public culture of wartime rape over and above a presumption of what constitutes culture or politics.

In being critical of the hegemonic aesthetic representation of the *birangona* as a horrific sublime, we need to rethink what is the political way of thinking about the war-heroine and comprehending the complex experiences of wartime rape. While the dissensual is posed by Rancière as the politics which can disrupt the distribution of the sensible, what I am critiquing here is the very folding in of the dissensual into the language of the sensible, the police - the bureaucratic orchestration of the social order. In order to bring out the horrific events of rape which was perpetrated by the Pakistani army and the local collaborators it is necessary to reiterate the horrific imagery of the women raped. At the same time this dissensual scene has itself become so noisy, that it has become the sensible, the police through which the *birangona* is known and hence seen. This itself has drowned the narratives of the war heroines and how they have survived, folded in their experiences of wartime rape within their everyday existence. If politics is what interrupts policy, is an event of disagreement with the order of power, which proposes a new distribution of the common world, what are the alternative zones of the sensible of the experience of being a *birangona*?

The theatre company staging the play also recorded the testimonies of the *birangonas* in Sirajganj which is available on their website. The horror of the war beyond the violent event of rape is evident in this film. In a moving testimony a woman narrates how she addressed her rapist in 71 as *baba* (usually meaning father when referred to older men or a term of endearment for young men) and pleaded that she not be raped. Instead, the man responded by saying: '*baba kosh na bhatar ka*' (don't call me a father call me a lover/fucker) and proceeded to rape her. On narrating this, the woman breaks down and draws our attention to the very break in humanity that occurs in the interaction between herself and her rapist. She attempts to remind him of the kinships of affection that is there between them in terms of him being like

a father to her or like a younger brother to whom she is reaching out through endearment. Instead, he rejects these gestures with violence and reminds her that in spite of these potential zones of affection and kindness he can only be a *bhatar* - lover/fucker. The woman's narration and she breaking down at this juncture is much more powerful in conveying the loss she felt in this rejection at the moment of her rape. The Sirajganj women poignantly narrate the various kinds of pain they carry as a result of the event of rape. For some of them their husbands 'became mad' and deserted some of the women as a result of the women being raped. Others narrate various losses as a result of being raped: the pain of not being able to bury a daughter who died when they were fleeing; the child who was disabled during 71 and suffers till today; not being able to give rice to a brother as he saw her taken away by the 'military' from across a field; the loss of a baby who was bayoneted by the Pakistani army; and the pain of miscarriage as a result of rape.

Politics is what Rancière describes as "the process through which those who don't have a name, attribute themselves a collective name, which they use to re-name and re-qualify a given situation" (...) "a collective of enunciation" (Rancière 2005: 83) that expresses its dissent. Here, rather than expressing dissent directly, the varied post-conflict life trajectory of the *birangona* would allow us to comprehend the various impacts of wartime rape and how women have survived that experience. The reiteration of the horrific sublime of the war heroine disallows that politics and aesthetics and instead freezes the women as raped so as to be mobilised for various causes. The nuanced life trajectory of the women who are *birangonas* is however an aesthetics that escapes such instrumentalisation.

Here a strong case needs to be made for ethnographic engagement and description which can work against the streamlining of the imagery of the *birangona*

into political certainties. I recognise the dilemma that lies at the heart of activists' project of identifying horrific features resulting from wartime violence as evidence of trauma. Declaring that rape is a war crime contradicted prevalent ideas that rape is natural during wars and that coercion can be ambiguous (even erotic). The validity of this war crime is, however, hinged on the existence of trauma. So activists repeated trauma through iconic/archetypical images—here of the raped woman. The dilemma for the activists is that they have to evoke trauma to make a case for the injustices of wartime rape during 1971. But the idea of trauma (i.e., not trauma itself) in fact freezes time; arrests dynamics and contradictions of experience, subject formation, and agency; and becomes a rigid mode condemned to repetition. Reinscribing personal stories into national and international domains as simple activist messages in fact obscures the richness and moral complexities of women's accounts and their experiences of dealing with sexual violence. We must tell these narratives outside this horrific, wounded nationalistic genre in order to communicate how people ethnographically fold the violence of wartime rape into everyday sociality. Further, it allows us to think of wartime rape narratives in a way which escapes instrumentalisation and can go beyond aesthetic registers.

## **Conclusion**

*Birangonas* are predominantly figured as a horrific sublime in Bangladesh and this is further made possible through the intertextual circulation of rumours, encounters, photographs and plays. If distribution of the sensible is a system of apriori form determining what presents itself to sense experiences, then the *birangona* as a horrific sublime becomes the aesthetic form which presents itself to sense experiences for the affective response of different Bangladeshis. While these aesthetic formulations of rumour, encounters, photographs and re-enactments bring out the history of rape

during the 71, they also enable a forgetting, an eliding of the complex life trajectories of the *birangonas* after the war. These aesthetic representations as indexes also highlight the unsayable hierarchies – the encoding – the moral judgement and ambiguity implicit in the very imagination of the war heroine.

How does aesthetics thought more widely and particularly through writers like Jacques Rancière offer a way of making visible forms of political and cultural hegemony via its emphasis on a certain 'distribution of the sensible' and sayable, here, the horrific sublime of the war heroine? Without an account of the multiplicity of post-conflict experiences, what remains obscure are the various ways in which *birangonas* have lived with the violence of wartime rape. It is through unravelling these scenes of hegemonic dissensus, that the politics of images and narratives of the *birangona* of 1971 can be comprehended as an 'aesthetic activity' going beyond which would constitute 'politics'.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Some journalists have however questioned the veracity of her testimony. See charge number 6 here: <http://bangladeshwarcrimes.blogspot.com/2013/02/5-feb-2013-mollah-final-judgment-part-5.html>; and charge number 5 here: <http://bangladeshwarcrimes.blogspot.com/2013/01/22-jan-2013-azad-judgment-part-5-crimes.html>.

<sup>2</sup> The number of women raped vary from 25,000/100,000/200,000/400,000 in different contexts (*Genocide Issue 1972*; Hasan 2002).

<sup>3</sup> See Bergman (2014) for a discussion of these contestations.

<sup>4</sup> Personal communication: Zobaida Nasreen.

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<sup>5</sup> Gilles Deleuze refers to affect as ‘an element of response that is prior to decision before I even think or conceptualise’ (Deleuze 1986) i.e. when being precedes cognition.

<sup>6</sup> See Ahmed (2004: 45), Hemmings (2005: 562).

<sup>7</sup> See [http://tarynsimon.com/works\\_additional.php](http://tarynsimon.com/works_additional.php)

<sup>8</sup> See Trickett (2013) (<http://www.londontheatre1.com/index.php/57073/birangona-women-of-war-komola-collective-tara-arts/>)

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