'Remembering to forget': public secrecy and memory of sexual violence in the Bangladesh war of 1971

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This article explores the processes through which the 'public secrecy' of rape during the Bangladesh war of 1971 operates within the present-day ethnographic context. It examines contemporary commemorations of the war and of women who have achieved local and national fame as rape victims (euphemistically referred to as 'war heroines'). The article analyses the discrepancy between raped women's national position as icons of 'honour' and their local reception through sanctions and constant *khota* (sarcastic/censorious remarks expressing scorn and evoking the unpleasant events). By exploring the relationship between scorn, honour, rape, sexuality, narratives of remembrance, and the emergence of 'public secrets' – and how these are interwoven by the subjectivity of the raped – the article argues that memories of rape are simultaneously located within the ambiguities of revelation and of concealment which are indispensable to the operations of power. In the process the article establishes the relationship between secrecy and memory. Further, a focus on the intersubjective domain of memory provides methodological and ethical tools with which to engage with narratives of the past relating to wartime violence.

On 28 March 1992, a photograph of Kajoli, Moyna, and Rohima – three poor, landless women from Enayetpur, a village in western Bangladesh – was printed on the front page of national newspapers with the caption: '*Birangonas* [war heroines] from Kushtia demand trial of Gholam Azum [a well-known collaborator of the war of 1971]'. *Birangonas* was a term given by the Bangladesh government in 1972 to all women who were raped during the Bangladesh war the previous year.[1] Kajoli, Moyna, and Rohima were among those raped, and they and their home village[2] were the primary focus of my fieldwork between 1997 and 1998.

On the same day, Enayetpur received its daily edition of the national Bengali newspaper *Doinik Jonokontho*, which was read in the library and in the marketplace teashop. Kajoli's husband Rafique was called over to the teashop when he came to the market to buy daily provisions of rice, oil, and salt. He recalled that the men were reading the newspaper aloud and laughing sneeringly about the fact that his wife had given testimony against Gholam Azum, the collaborator. They told Rafique that by publicly acknowledging that they had been raped by 'the military' (the term used to refer to the Pakistani soldiers of 1971), the news had spread *deshe bideshe* (all over the country and

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the world). Accordingly, on their return to Enayetpur the 'war heroines' were confronted by sanctions and constant *khota* (sarcastic/censorious remarks evoking the unpleasant events which I refer to as scorn).

This article explores how Enayetpur remembers and negotiates its history of rape during the war through the discourse of *khota*/scorn towards the three *birangonas*. I argue that scorn provides the framework within which the memory of rape exists in Enayetpur, but that this rape is a public secret and thus the framework is subject to ambiguities of revelation and concealment that are indispensable to the operations of power. This framework allows an exploration of the relationship between secrecy and memory and provides methodological tools with which to engage with narratives of the past relating to wartime violence. This argument of revelation and concealment is hinged on the perception that experiences of sexual violence are often shrouded in silence. While, on the one hand, this is the case in Enayetpur, on the other, scorn towards the raped women keeps alive the memories of this violent encounter and also reveals the silence surrounding wartime rape. Consequently the process also sets up sanctions against the overt narration of the experience of rape, ensuring that it remains concealed as a secret, *a public secret*, only to be invoked at specific moments in the context of intersubjective dynamics. The revelation and concealment in the process highlight the ambiguity of the villagers towards the exposure of the local history of the war and the transgressed sexuality of the raped woman. In fact, the very shunning of the raped woman because of the public secrecy of rape ensures her representation through scorn.

In his classic essay 'The secret and the secret society', Georg Simmel analyses secrecy through his discussion of lying (1950: 312), the latter being at the root of all social interactions and affecting reciprocal knowledge. To him, the secret is a consciously desired concealment (1950: 317) which enables an individual or a 'secret society' to retain power, brag about a moral misconduct, or fashion themselves in response to the judgements made by others. Secrecy thus ensures group cohesion through the restriction of the social distribution of knowledge over time. Ultimately it is woven into the system of power and control in society. Following Simmel,[3] Michael Gilsenan, in his explication of *kizb* (an Arabic word translated as 'lying') in Lebanon, refers to judgements made by others as 'attributions' (1976: 192). This is based on a 'status honour code' – 'situations of ultimate reference within which men transact their socially significant selves' (1976: 211). This code is distinguished by its public nature, but people live by *kizb* and secrecy and they do so in ways that must at the same time appear to others to satisfy the demands of the normative and moral code.[4]

Here, in relation to the raped women, what is central to the article is Simmel's arguments about the judgements made by others rather than how the raped women fashion themselves on the basis of these judgements. However, in the case of Bangladesh, Simmel's presupposition that levels of secrecy are determined by individuals/groups who have something to hide is incapable of analysing the intersubjective domains of secrecy. How is secrecy determined when a group/community to which an individual belongs determines the latter's experience to be a 'public secret', that is, known but not articulated? Michael Taussig's idea of public secrecy in *Defacement: public secrecy and the labour of the negative* (1999) allows an exploration of the subjective and intersubjective domain of the circulatory nature of secrecy. Further, it offers an examination of the relationship between public secrecy and the discourse of rape and raises the

question: is the discussion on rape maintained by public secrets, and are public secrets authorized by the discourse? Inspired by Elias Cannetti's (1984) argument that 'secrecy lies at the core of power', Taussig (1999: 7) argues that defacement, achieved by the drama of revelation, produces the sacred. The act of revealing a familiar public secret is transgressive. Hence the knowledge of secrecy of this public secret is made powerful through an active not-knowing. The article follows Taussig's argument that, paradoxically, secrecy is actively not known and yet it is disclosed in order to be defaced, revealed (through *khota* in this case), which in turn enables its concealment. The article demonstrates that herein lies the enchanting potential of the public secrecy of rape, which makes it indispensable to the operations of power and subservience. Instead of concentrating on the operations of secrecy among men only (common among ethnographies of secrecy like Gilsenan 1976, Herdt 2003, Simmel 1950), the article examines how the process of public secrecy incorporates the trappings of power and dominance in the case of the weak, tabooed, anonymous, and subservient.

The first section of the article explores the historical and political trajectory in Bangladesh within which the photograph of the three women is located. The second section maps how *khota* operates through everyday normative codes and practices in Enayetpur. It explores various idioms of secrecy, honour, female sexuality and its link to body parts, constitution of publics, and the emergence of public secrets. Through these idioms villagers express scorn,[5] construct varied subjectivities of the women as raped, liberation fighters, victims, or weak, and hence ensure the strengthening of existing social control, power, and inequality. However, while the article is interested in the examination of these various normative codes, it is more interested in highlighting the way in which they are reasserted through the phenomenon of the public secrecy of the 1971 rapes. Hence in the third section, it explores the narratives of remembrance of 1971 and examines the processes of revelation and concealment of the public secrecy of rape. This allows an insight into the local politics relating to the war, the vulnerability and contradictions of the community in the context of its complicity with the history of rape, and the contested modes of remembrance and secrecy. Significantly, the link with local events and politics locates public secrecy within historical and political trajectories and anchors it within competing publics *vis-à-vis* the national history of rape – a perspective conspicuously absent in Taussig's study. In the process, the article highlights the disjunctive effect of public memory and the intersubjective domain of public secrecy based on oral circulation of rumour and judgement.

The *Gono Adalat* photograph and its politico-historical underpinnings

In 1947, the independence of India from British colonial rule resulted in the creation of a new homeland for the Muslims of India by carving out the eastern and north-western corners of the country, which came to be known as East and West Pakistan, respectively. Thus in the formation of Pakistan, Islam was the sole principle of nationhood unifying two widely disparate regions, separated not only by geography but also by sharp cultural and linguistic differences. Reluctant to rely on religious allegiance alone, successive governments in Pakistan embarked on a strategy of forcible cultural assimilation towards the Bengalis. Over the years, such impositions allied to West Pakistani administrative, military, linguistic, civil, and economic control resulted in the nine-month long liberation war[6] in 1971, and ultimately in the formation of Bangladesh. At the end of this struggle Bangladesh was faced with the staggering

number of 3 million dead and 200,000 women raped[7] by the Pakistani army and *Razakars* (local Bengali collaborators) (Brownmiller 1975; Mascarenhas 1971; Rahamana 1982-5: vol. 8). As mentioned earlier, after the war, the Bangladeshi government referred to the raped women as *birangonas* ('war heroines') to prevent them from being socially ostracized, and attempted to rehabilitate them by marrying them off or introducing them to the labour market.[8] This eulogization of raped women as 'war heroines' and their rehabilitation was rooted in a modernist agenda. It became a trope for the symbolic evocation of the dynamism of the new nation, which ensured the latter's development out of the 'traditions and taboos of Muslim society' (National Board of Bangladesh Women's Rehabilitation Programme 1974). However, this state policy of reintegrating the 'war heroines' was unsuccessful and the women disappeared from public discourse.

The issue of rape during the war was widely reported in the press from December 1971 until mid-1973, after which it was relegated to oblivion in government and journalistic consciousness. The issue arose again on 28 March 1992 with the publication of the aforementioned photograph[9] – the latter occurring within two frameworks of Bangladeshi politics in the 1990s. First, it emerged in the context of the increasing importance of the memories of 1971 in the politics of the 1990s in Bangladesh, particularly in relation to the trial of collaborators like Gholam Azum who had been politically reinstated during the fifteen years of military rule (1975-90). On 26 March 1992 the *Gono Adalat* (People's Tribunal) – a massively mobilized movement led by Jahanara Imam[10] and the left-liberal cultural elites – was held under the organizational auspices of the *Nirmul* Committee[11] demanding the trial of collaborators and protesting against their political rehabilitation. Secondly, in the 1990s the international recognition of rape as a war crime also made it imperative for various Bangladeshi feminist and human rights activists to document histories of sexual violation committed during the 1971 war so as to provide supporting evidence to enable the trial of the collaborators (Akhtar, Begum, Hossein, Kamal & Guhathakurta 2001; Asad 1996; De 1998; Guhathakurta 1996; Ibrahim 1994-5; R. Islam 1994). This entailed a search for 'grassroots', 'subaltern' 'war heroines' and the recording of their testimonies of rape by various left-liberal journalists, feminists, NGO activists, and human rights lawyers (Mookherjee 2002; 2003).

Against this combined backdrop – the demand for trial of collaborators and the search for narratives of raped women from the 'grassroots' – Kajoli, Moyna, and Rohima were taken to Bangladesh's capital, Dhaka, by local village leaders to take part in the *Gono Adalat*. In the *Gono Adalat* various testimonies of affected individuals – those who had lost fathers, brothers, or sons – were narrated as part of the drive to demand the trial of the collaborators. Such narratives were juxtaposed with the aforementioned photograph of the 'testimonial' presence of the three women from Enayetpur, who were exhibited as women raped during the war. This enabled a focus on the role of the collaborators in 1971, and the need for their trial in the 1990s. Even after the *Gono Adalat*, these three women have been photographed innumerable times. Their narratives and their images have found places in national news articles, books, documentaries, and commemorative programmes on the war, all of which demand the trial of collaborators. The next section explores how the villagers in Enayetpur responded to this public presence of the image and narrative of the three raped women as 'war heroines' – through the operation of *khota* – in the everyday normative codes and practices of secrecy and honour.

Idioms of secrecy and *khota*

A forty-five-minute rickshaw-van ride through picturesque harvested fields of sugarcane, rice, and mustard brings the visitor to Enayetpur, a village located on the bank of the Podda, one of the largest rivers of Bangladesh. During the war Enayetpur's proximity to the river ensured that it became a strategic nodal point for all parties. Refugees would flee through here to India using boats to cross the river. Liberation fighters used the river to acquire arms and this provoked surveillance and repeated visits by the Pakistani army. The rape of the three women in Enayetpur occurred as a result of the Pakistani army's presence in the village while it was searching for liberation fighters. Villagers perceived rape both as a premeditated army policy and as a consequence of the context of war, in which unsystematic and chaotic confrontations between soldiers and local village women afforded innumerable opportunities for rape. Villagers also considered rape to be a means by which local collaborators (while helping the Pakistani military's hunt for the liberation fighters) tried to settle scores relating to local enmities (Mookherjee 2002).[12]

With a population of around 900, the predominantly Muslim villagers worked as peasants, landless or wage labourers, or were part of the dominant weaver community. Villagers informed me that the minority Hindu community had mostly left for India, though a few households supported by fishermen, milkmen, sculptors, and basket-weavers still remained. Four to five families in the village had moderate ownership of land and were well-off. However, the main power centres of Enayetpur in terms of status and wealth were two antagonistic cousins of the Munshi family: Tuhin, the younger and friendlier, owed his power to a variety of endowments, such as his landed assets, family name, his urban Dhaka connections, and his alliance with the political party Awami League (his sister was the MP for the area), while Bhulen Master (as he was commonly called), a teacher in the Enayetpur school and a well-known liberation fighter, was a leading political leader who exerted his authority by virtue of ownership of usurped Hindu lands and his arrogant demeanour.

Rafique, Imarot, and Korban were the husbands of the raped women Kajoli, Rohima, and Moyna, respectively, all of whom were landless, poor peasants in Enayetpur. Rafique and Kajoli's house consisted of two derelict huts made of bamboo and straw.[13] Rafique earned his living by making bamboo roofs and walls, while Kajoli spun thread bundles, for which she got 2.50 *taka*[14] for each bundle, and share-reared[15] (*barga*) a cow. Rohima and Imarot's house consisted of a piece of land and three huts made out of bamboo and aluminium. Imarot did *barga* (day-labour) on the *chor* (a strip of sandy land arising in the middle of the river as a result of river erosion) owned by Bhulen. Rohima, meanwhile, share-reared Bhulen's cow. Moyna and Korban's house consisted of one hut with an aluminium roof and was sustained by their son's earnings as a rickshaw-van driver, along with some income generated from selling milk from their one cow. Korban worked on a small patch of land due to the fact that the family plot had been 'eaten [eroded] by the river'. It is important to point out that Rohima and Moyna were comparatively better-off than Kajoli, as indicated through their material and symbolic capital of aluminium roofs, ownership of a small patch of land, married daughters, and, crucially, incomes accrued from their husbands and adult sons. In stark contrast to possessions of Rohima and Moyna stood Kajoli's more desolate predicament: derelict huts, landlessness, two non-earning 10-year-old school-going twin sons, unmarried daughters, and the absence of close, adult, male kin members.

All three of the women and their families were subjected to varieties of *khota*, predominantly through local everyday disagreements (Mookherjee 2004). Whenever any differences arose, such as arguments arising from children fighting or disputes over the share of the harvest, the disagreeing party, namely extended family members, neighbours, villagers, and other acquaintances, would raise the issue of the rapes. The main reason for *khota* in Enayetpur as expressed by villagers was the appropriateness of talking about the rapes, which *had been* a secret for twenty-one years. Something that had been concealed had been revealed. As Moyna narrated,

> They say we should not put our words in news articles as we have grown-up children, married daughters and *kutumb* [in-laws] who would come to know these things. My sister-in-law warned me that because of this publicity I would have no place in *behest* [heaven] and go to *dojok* [hell].

As a result, the violence of *khota* also affected the women's families in their daily relations. All the women would refer to a loss of sociability and how they would refrain from visiting others and mixing with people for fear of being scorned. Hence Kajoli would take a bucket bath at home instead of bathing communally in the *ghat* (pond).[16] The women's sense of vulnerability to comments by others is similar to Goffman's (1963) argument about a sense of stigma being related to invasions of privacy: that is, the women would reiterate that the fear of *khota* in these public spaces disgraced them, permeating their inner beings and making them frustrated, angry, and listless. Further, the public spaces of the village like bathing *ghats*, ponds, teashops, and the marketplace became sites for the operation of *khota* against their children and husbands and ensured the continuous evocation of the violence of rape as a public secret. This highlights Taussig's argument relating to the interplay between revelation and concealment; the public character of these spaces ensures that the women's experiences of rape is revealed through scorning while concealed as a 'public secret' by the community. Here, the public secret becomes constitutive of the public space in Enayetpur while ensuring the emergence of a public in competition with the national public constituted around the official history of the rapes of 1971.

In the successive years after the *Gono Adalat*, the situation became exacerbated with the frequent trips made by the women or their husbands to Dhaka as well as by the regularity of urban visitors coming with cameras and tape-recorders to meet the women. These visits made the villagers assume that the women were receiving material and financial compensation for talking about their experience of rape. Rohima recalled,

> People did *upohash* [taunts/jeers] whenever we came back from Dhaka and asked how many bags of money we had brought back. They said, by repeating 'those words' [account of rape] we are earning money. We are selling skins and 'doing business' [prostitution].

The linking of prostitution to the public exposure of rape – as well as the link between body parts and loss of *man ijjot* (status and honour linked to sexual relationships) as expressed through 'selling skins' and 'doing business' – highlights how through different idioms of secrecy villagers inflict *khota*. Villagers in Enayetpur would explain that when they heard about the rapes in 1971, they had nothing to say and there were no social sanctions against the women because they knew that this violent sexual encounter was forced, a tragedy which could have befallen anyone's family. However, today, since the women are seen as talking about something which is a secret, many

villagers have evoked sanctions against them. Hence the event of rape and, above all, the women's perceived intentionality of talking about it publicly makes them not heroines but sinners who have consequently lost their positions as moral persons.

With the loss of moral virtue, which Bourdieu (1995 [1977]) links to power and whose 'demonstration … wins respect from others' (Abu-Lughod 1988: 99), the women seem to have forfeited their social status. It is shameful to talk about *oi kotha* (those words), *oi kahini* (those stories), *oi kaaj* (that work) when they have adult sons, married daughters, and *kutumb*. Shame here seems to be less an individual and gendered attribute than a property of the family and its networks, but it is simultaneously related to the sexually neutral connotations of being a mother and mother-in-law – as the loss of *man ijjot* for some women in the village arose only in the case of younger people. In this case, where the mother figure is implicated, not only does the family get to know of a 'shameful' thing about her, but it is also reminded of her sexuality, which is no longer her central attribute.

The ambivalence concerning the significance of the sexuality of a woman as both female and mother was further indicated when I asked women why it was problematic to talk about rape when liberation fighters could talk about the experience of losing their limbs in the war. In response, women of various socio-economic conditions reminded me that for a woman her *man ijjot* is the most important thing and is hence clothed and covered. 'Don't we keep our hands and face bare? The shameful thing is that these women are talking of something which is covered'. Lila Abu-Lughod's (1988: 107) formulation with reference to Egypt has resonance here. She shows how in Egypt various Qur'anic references to modesty and chastity literally imply the protection of female genitalia. Thus while *man ijjot* can be understood as referring to one's honour and social status in society, it may also refer to the genitals as these are the source of women's honour and status in society. I would agree with Stewart's (1994: 44) argument that while honour becomes increasingly based on the possession of certain moral virtues, the *word* honour comes to be understood as referring to those things from which honour derives; hence the genitals referred to as *man ijjot* also become the source of *man ijjot*. Thus sexuality is negated for the *birangonas* as mothers while concurrently its significance is reconfirmed by locating honour and status in their hidden genitals.

This apparatus of *man ijjot* is further guided by rules of sexual activity with one's husband. Marriage as a feature of agnation in Bangladesh is considered to be the principal form of gender relatedness and the mark of adulthood and completeness (Kotalova 1996: 45). By talking about their rape, the women simultaneously acknowledged the transgression of their completeness (as embedded in marriage) and the loss of their attributes of honour effected by the violation of their genitals. Hence it is 'a very shameful and distasteful thing'. In fact violation of the genitalia as a dismembered body part and a fixation with it establishes its metonymic relationship with the act of rape and may be intimately related to the ideologies of private property and commodity logic (Strathern 1988: 133). Thus the comment of Sobur Master (an elderly schoolteacher) that the rape of one's wife is equivalent to her elopement with another man. The man who had possessed her is insulted as in both cases his property has been usurped by another. Hence the commodity logic of women as private property only makes sense in their circulation among men.

The feminine social code as regards to sexual activity with husbands is highlighted when villagers refer to the women as prostitutes. Shamsul Talukdar, an economically middle-ranking weaver, referred to raped women as being 'in the business of being

naked'. His wife, working in the kitchen, raised her voice and sneered, 'by publicly uncovering themselves they receive *sarees* as gifts from Dhaka [during national commemorations] to cover themselves'. It was only in the 1990s that the women were equated as prostitutes because, first, like a prostitute a *birangona*'s sexual activity has been with men outside of marriage and, second, because in exchange for public exposure through photographs and texts – which makes their face, skin, body, identity, personhood, and narrative representative of the tabooed event of rape – the women have received material benefits. Jahangir (1979: 87) shows how honour and status are lost when money, property, or other material benefits are gained by methods which are deemed disreputable. However, he clarifies that rich peasants, middle-class and rich women would receive grudging respect and preferential treatment even if their material transactions were deemed to be dishonest (see also Rozario 1992; White 1992). In this instance, where poor women have no material resources to demand respect, they might only have their moral selves and honour as symbolic capital, which the poor war heroines are perceived to have lost. In fact, a curious overlap takes place in this discourse between that of the woman's body and that of the social body of the community. The notion of covering *man ijjot* by the women in the village refers to a bodily covering of the female genitals, the hidden role of which in ensuring a sexual relationship with one's husband secures one's status and prestige. *Man ijjot* is also retained when the account of having been raped is not made public. The women's disclosure about being raped during the war hence brings to the surface the fact that their hidden, covered genitalia has been transgressed leading to a loss of *man ijjot*. That loss is amplified according to the villagers when they transgress the norm of keeping quiet about their rape and hence bring upon themselves both the social implications of having been raped and social sanctions through *khota*.

Secrecy is a celebrated virtue in the socialscape of Enayetpur and its significance among the *birangonas* is exhibited by common accounts of *Bibi* Fatima. As the daughter of the Prophet, she is constructed as a quiet and obedient wife who achieves motherhood through piety rather than through sexuality. She is often compared to Aisha, the dynamic, forceful, and childless favourite wife of the Prophet.[17] Moyna narrated at various times how Fatima went without food for many days, but kept it secret and only told Allah about it. Jobbar Molla, a village leader, remarked that 'what is old should remain old; it should not be made new, but only opened before Allah'.

The codes of secrecy *vis-à-vis* the perceived intentionality on the part of the women to talk publicly about their experience of rape influences the construction of their varied subjectivities as victims, liberation fighters, or *birangonas*. Some of the younger men in the village have expressed disbelief about whether the women were actually raped. The key paradox here is that these youths reason that someone who has 'truly' been raped would 'attempt to conceal it' (*chapa rakhbe*).[18] For the young men, a raped woman who refuses to acknowledge and speak about her account of sexual violence indicates her shame and this makes her authentically raped. Local liberation fighters similarly disbelieved the women. To them the yardstick of being authentically raped is based on hiding one's history and masking it through marriage. They explained that raped but unmarried women hid the rape so as to get married and already-married women who had been raped kept quiet about their wartime experience to avoid familial non-acceptance. Hence in Enayetpur 'silence is of all signs the one regarded as most indicative of full intention' (Gilsenan 1976: 216)[19] and is the marker of an authentic raped woman and a moral being.

In Dhaka, however, the women were characterized through a rhetoric of heroism which identified war heroines as liberation fighters as they had sacrificed and fought with their bodies through the violent encounter of rape. This enabled Kajoli, Rohima, and Moyna to compare themselves as *birangonas* with the Prophet's wives, who, as 'war heroines', upheld the ideals of Islam in various struggles (Moinuddin 1978).[20] In contrast to the villagers' idea about secrecy and talking, for the raped women 'one becomes a *birangona* only when one comes out in the open. Otherwise those who are *chapa* – hidden, quiet – keep their accounts of rape to themselves, are therefore not *birangonas*'. Thus to the women, heroism requires social acknowledgement. In the village, however, this is lacking and they are marked as shameful. While they were accorded respect as 'war heroines' in Dhaka, they were left to fend for their honour in their own social milieu, where they did not possess the social capital to command such respect. 'Thus the chairs[21] we were given to sit on in Dhaka have been pulled away in Enayetpur, but people know we sat on the chairs'.

Local liberation fighters and local officials do not share the rhetoric of heroism which equates *birangonas* with liberation fighters. This is reflected in a comment by a local liberation fighter, 'Photo' Hannan (he is so called as he owns a photography shop), that these raped women are not liberation fighters as they had no role in the war compared to the latter's active valour. 'One would be quiet when one is traumatized', Hannan emphasized. Hence while the women consider that their agency of talking about rape makes them *birangonas*, this agency is comprehended by villagers and liberation fighters alike as contravening the women's image of victimhood; by talking they are no longer silent victims but are making inappropriate claims to heroism.

Anukul Pal, a member of the minority Hindu community who owns a grocery shop in the marketplace, said that ' "*Prokash*" [exposure] equates to resistance. *Chup thaka* [to keep quiet] means being subverted and fits the image of a victim'. He cited the example of villagers who take things from his shop without paying because they know that he, as a member of a minority community, cannot protest for fear of rendering his existence and business precarious. Thus by analogy the *birangonas*, weakened by virtue of losing their status through rape, should keep quiet. Halim Paramanik, one of the patriarchs of the huge weaver[22] community in Enayetpur, gave an example of how a Hindu man had been slapped in the marketplace and, without protesting, had left for India the next day. Here Halim suggests that, in a situation where one cannot protest due to lack of social strength and authority, it is best not to do so. The Hindu man, being a member of a religious minority, knew he could do nothing against the man who had slapped him and that it was hence best to exit. Halim, in a Taussigian vein, seems to suggest that 'truth is a revelation which does justice to it' (Taussig 1999: 2), or, in other words, that truth is only worth evoking if one can seek justice through it. For the women it is fruitless to reveal the truth of rape, as they cannot punish the rapist. Halim said the idea of *purdah* was to keep things *chapa* (hidden, covered), which was not necessarily through the external *burkha* but via the right codes of conduct.[23] The action of the women in talking about the rape, particularly for the purpose of receiving money in exchange, is therefore sinful. The rightful action of the victim, weak and tabooed, is to be quiet, to remain covered and invisible, and not to protest against the wrongs done to her.

The Enayetpur women's perception of a 'war heroine' is based on their act of 'coming out'. Paradoxically today it is this decision to talk about their rape despite their lack of active valour during the war that makes raped women ineligible for the

position of victimhood and instead an object of disdain for local officials, leaders, and liberation fighters. Woven into this scorn is the subordinate position of the women and their families within village power structures. The way the men laughed at Rafique when photographs of the women were first published in the newspaper is indicative not only of the men's sense of superiority *vis-à-vis* the women and their families but also of their disdain for the 'anonymous' women who dared, on the basis of their position as rape victims, to bear witness against Gholam Azum. The men's contempt for these 'war heroines' reveals an intention to subvert the connotations of a national honour which could potentially undermine the social framework of power within the village. The following section shows how the reassertion of this social framework through *khota* is enacted through narratives of disjunctive remembrance relating to local events after the war and demonstrates how the continued subordination of these women is linked to the processes of revelation and concealment of public secrecy which are intrinsic to these narratives.

Disjunctive memories and public secrecy

In Enayetpur everyone, everywhere had a story of *gondogoler bochor* (the year of chaos, i.e. the war of 1971). Thus the local events of the war, the role of liberation fighters, military training, stories of valour, arson, killings, bombings, ambushes, everyday travails of survival, displacement, floods, hardships, food scarcity, were vividly and spontaneously narrated. Within these narratives, generic accounts of *nari nirjaton* (literally torture of women, i.e. rape) were always present. Liberation fighters commonly held that it was only when people saw their sisters being raped in front of them that their spirit rose to fight against the Pakistani army. It seems that in the context of war, men conceptually and abstractly comprehend the raped women as remaining in a state of 'permanent rape' (Butalia 1995: 76) so that they served to provoke them to avenge themselves on those responsible. This conceptual and abstract imagination of and fixation with the rape of women enabled the mobilization of passions to go to war. Enayetpur villagers would say that because the military started raping, it brought Allah's wrath upon it and hence was defeated within a short span of time despite the strength of its army.

In initial conversations with villagers, allusions to rape were about events in neighbouring villages, but never about Enayetpur. Butalia (1995: 62) similarly observed that her informants, when referring to 'abductions' during the 1947 Partition of India, always referred to them as afflicting other families. In Enayetpur, group dynamics as well as comments from audiences during conversations and interviews relating to the war eventually prompted local accounts of rape and encouraged speakers to talk about specific events in Enayetpur. In trying to explain the reasons for rape, a poor but philosophical liberation fighter, Yusuf, blamed it on the mentality of war, which attempts to occupy everything forcefully. He compared military activity to '*shontrashi* [anti-social] activities,[24] whose propensity is forceful seizure, be that of a goat, a cow, or a beautiful girl fleeing to India'. Shiraj, an attendant boatman, prompted him by saying 'yes, remember what happened to Policeman Ghosh's daughter?' When asked what he meant, Shiraj answered that people do not talk about this event as the individuals involved continue to live in Enayetpur; such talk would result in 'the spit [insult] falling back on us'.

During the war the family of the Hindu policeman Anil, normally resident in the neighbouring district of Pabna, had stopped in Enayetpur while fleeing to India.

Ghosh's daughter was gang-raped in a field by three local youths, Chandu, Fazlu, and Shamsuddin. Yusuf explained that in the context of the chaos and free-for-all situation of the war these young men could not resist the temptation of raping a 'Hindu'[25] refugee woman. They knew that since she was fleeing to India she could not bring them to justice and hence they would not be reprimanded for their heinous action. The rape threatened the local Hindu community, which felt more vulnerable given the war situation: as Yusuf said, 'suddenly the Hindu-Muslim difference within us became apparent. We couldn't just blame the military for doing all this *nirjaton* [torture]'.

Yusuf's explanation offers a contrast to the romantic construction of Hindu-Muslim amity suggested by the richer farmers of Enayetpur. This amity is described through the metaphor of the harmonious sounds of *ajaan* (the chant of prayers from mosques) and *shankh* (conch shells used for Hindu religious services). The abundance of anecdotes and accounts of rape in other places compared to the absence of reference to local rapes, such as those of the three women and of Ghosh's daughter, indicates that some, at least, of the villagers would 'remember to forget' in order to maintain a collective forgetting. Thus in these villagers' attempts to retell and recollect local events there has been a simultaneous process of 'production as suppression' (Cohen 1994: 13), a constant process of 'knowing what not to know' (Taussig 1999: 2). In light of Tonkin's assertion that 'literate or illiterate, we are our memories' (1992: 1), how do Enayetpur villagers remember to forget the history of the rapes of 1971 since remembering and forgetting are both social acts?

I got to know about the rape of Ghosh's daughter in the context of a discussion on local *Union Porishod* elections in December 1997 which discussed the role of the underground Left in a neighbouring administrative unit and criticized Bhulen's use of bribery in local elections. Narratives of Ghosh's daughter's rape and of the complicity of local leaders and liberation fighters in exonerating the rapists because of kinship and patronage ties provide a window through which to view the complex webs of local politics. Apt here is Kirmayer's argument that '[r]ecollection is based on the past context in which a story is historically rooted and the current context in which the story is retold' (1996: 191). As a result of narrating the rape of Ghosh's daughter, Yusuf could proceed to elaborate the crimes of well-off liberation fighter*s* and leaders including their links with collaborators, the ways they exonerated guilty persons linked to them by kinship, their involvement in killing ultra-left liberation fighter*s* after the war, their appropriation of relief goods meant for afflicted people, and their usurpation of the lands of Hindu fishing communities.

People, however, would never talk of the three women's rapes within the collective pantheon of the events of the war but only as 'an event of here [local]',[26] a secret. By not including the rapes of the three women within the broader history of the birth of the nation, any significance and honour that had been accorded to the Enayetpur *birangonas* at the national level was effaced in the village while the subordinate and anonymous social status of the three women remained intact. Further, by not alluding to the rapes as part of the history of the war, reference to the rape of Ghosh's daughter (whose presence in Enayetpur was only due to the war) was avoided. Were this not the case, individuals and local leaders would be implicated in the event and subsequent post-war events, and the vaunted Hindu-Muslim harmony of '*ajaan* and *shaankh*' would be shattered. Shifting to the local register, one could talk about the public secret of the rape of the *birangonas* through *khota* because here blame could not be

apportioned to any individual within the village. Instead, discourses of scorn, sin, and blame could be applied to the women.

This situation has resonance with that described by Kirmayer (1996), who shows with reference to Holocaust memories that an excess of memory of valour requires commemoration and retelling. It can further be argued that commemoration itself produces an excessive memory of heroism, as is clear with reference to the memories of 1971 related to Enayetpur. Kirmayer contrasts Holocaust narratives to accounts of child abuse victims, which, like the rapes in Enayetpur, involve a violent personal account whose moral implications attack the social codes of femininity and the weak as well as the power and prestige of the local community. At the same time the rape of the policeman's daughter is subsumed under the accounts of *khota* towards the three women. This is because the former has the potential to threaten the community with moral dissolution and locate culpability with its existing leaders. This is, however, avoided and Enayetpur's complicity with the rape of Ghosh's daughter remains conveniently silenced and hidden by the 'shameful' narratives of the three women. In fact the pattern in which villagers in Enayetpur choose to forget and then remember and *perform* memory of the rapes of 1971 is indicative of Connerton's (1989: 38-40) argument that collective memory and individual memory are so interconnected that these interconnections are central to how societies remember, which is then played out in their commemorative practices. The villagers in Enayetpur know what they should remember to forget and that in turn influences how they performatively recall and memorialize the war of 1971.

It is this social knowledge of knowing what not to know that lies at the heart of performing memory and of fetishizing public secrecy. During interviews, speakers would often initially rebuff promptings about the three women as something about which one should not talk. Talukdar, a rich farmer of Enayetpur, stated that it was *chapa* (secret). As the conversation was taking place during the month of *Ramzaan* (Ramadan) Talukdar initially said it was a sin to talk about it during fasting. He went on, however, to explain why this was the case by offering a lengthy, detailed account of the scorn the women were subject to due to their activities in the 1990s. The constant assertions that 'one should not talk about it as it was a secret' followed immediately afterwards by elaborations of *khota* implies the presence of the public secret. It seems that people were always doomed to talk about it precisely because it was a secret. They were engaged in a process of concealment whose only end was revelation. It was as if only by revelation could the public secret be converted into a real or pure secret. This fixation with discussing 'what one should not talk about' shows that paradoxically what is secret is actively 'not known' and yet is disclosed in order to be defaced through *khota*, which in turn enables its concealment – an argument following Taussig's claim. This process of revelation and concealment of the public secrecy of rape is similar to Foucault's axiom in *History of sexuality*: 'What is peculiar to modern societies is not that they consigned sex to a shadow existence, but that they dedicated themselves to speaking of it *ad infinitum*, while exploiting it as *the* secret (1990 [1978]: 35). In Enayetpur a discourse of secrecy is imposed on public knowledge, which is, however, doomed to remain a public secret precisely through its reiteration and simultaneous cover-ups in public sites such as bathing *ghats*, ponds, teashops, the marketplaces, and courtyards.

While the villagers are critical of the *birangonas*' attempt to talk, this does not deter them from revealing the intricacies of their cases through the discourse of *khota*. Hence

secrecy simultaneously effaces and makes visible the body. Taussig, through his examination of flag burning as well as desecrations of royal statues and of Australian currency (1999: 31-55), argues that an effervescent empowerment is unleashed by the process of desecrating objects which thereby enhances their sanctity. By contrast, the national face of *birangonas* acquired by the three women is defaced in the village by scorn and this, while enabling their excessive visibility, does not enhance their sanctity. This secret, kept covered through its constant revelation, instead becomes indispensable to the operation of power enabling a consequent strengthening of existing inequality.

Conclusion

By focusing on the process through which *khota* is applied to raped women I have attempted to explore the interrelationship between the permeable boundaries of secrecy and memory – the former designating what should be concealed and the latter comprising the narration of the past. With their emphasis on the spoken word, embodied accounts are not included within the discussions in the article. The relationship between secrecy and memory is important in the context of the increasing significance of narratives of the past and oral histories within anthropology. Particularly, in the context of recounting wartime violence relating to rape, the article provides methodological tools with which to engage ethically with the growing narratives of wartime sexual violence through an exploration of the intersubjective domains of memory. By locating violent encounters within political and historical contexts it disallows voyeurism and keeps in mind Daniel's ethnographic caution against a 'pornography of violence' (1997: 4).

In Enayetpur the violence of the rapes of the three women was made a secret by the villagers and the women because such secrecy was seen as providing security from the horrors of rape and its aftermath. However, the visual testimony within national commemorative frameworks of the raped women transgressed the code of Enayetpur's unspoken event. This transgression was further exacerbated by the national honour accorded to the women as 'war heroines' due to their 'tabooed' virtue of being raped during the war which contrasted violently with their landless, poor, anonymous, and subordinate status in Enayetpur. *Khota,* inflicted on the women in their home community, operates as a controlling mechanism and restrains the raped women and their families from talking about their experiences. The secrecy it enforces ensures the prevalence of 'status honour' (Gilsenan 1976: 211), supports normative codes (namely gender ideologies, intergenerational transmission of information, ethics of exchange and sexuality), and constructs subject positions for the raped women and their families as weak, tabooed, subservient, and anonymous.

Georg Simmel's understanding of secrecy as a consciously desired concealment that magnifies reality is based on an opposition between a visible exterior and an invisible depth that determines that exterior. It cannot take into account how the horrors and violence of war are absorbed by societies and how the interpersonal dynamics of public secrecy based on oral circulation of rumour and judgement blur the boundaries between public and private secrecy. Instead Taussig's argument relating to the fetishization of public secrecy allows an exploration of the contexts and processes of revelation and concealment which highlights how *khota* emerges as the form through which villagers can remember and articulate the event of rape yet ensure that it remains concealed as a secret, and hence guarantee the continued subordination of the

women and their families. Therein lie the enchanting potential and varied operations of power.

The fetishization of this public secret, which is intrinsic to the intersubjective relationship between secrecy and memory, also provides the methodological tool with which to explore how societies engage with violent wartime experiences, particularly those relating to rape. A focus on the disjunctive effect of public memory and the intersubjective domain of public secrecy based on oral circulation of rumour and judgement enables ethnographers to avoid a voyeurism of violence. Significantly, and in contrast to Simmel and Taussig's analyses, this focus anchors public secrecy to local history and politics. Hence for the villagers of Enayetpur the history of the local events of valour is directly made part of the national history and memories of it are actively excavated. Rapes can, however, only be cited as a local events which are simultaneously public secrets, revealed only through the attempt at concealment. This empowers the secret of rape and ensures that people remember to forget; they know what not to know. Hence to talk about rape, the village searches for the *khota* applicable to *birangonas*, which actively covers other rapes and ensures that the involvement of the community in these other rapes remains a secret.

In summary, then, I have argued that scorn provides the framework within which the memory of rape exists in Enayetpur, but that this framework is subject to the ambiguities of revelation and concealment which are characteristic of the public secrecy of rape and indispensable to the operations of power. This framework allows both an exploration of the relationship between secrecy and memory and a focus on the disjunctive effects of public memory and the intersubjective domains of public secrecy which together provide methodological tools with which to engage ethically with narratives of the past relating to wartime violence. In so doing it does not ignore Enayetpur's complicity with the horrors of war and rape in the 'year of chaos'.

NOTES

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[1] The government designation of 'war heroines' applied to all women who had been raped during the war. Evidences of the history of rape published soon after the war (Brownmiller 1975; Mascarenhas 1971; Rahamana 1982-5: vol. 8 – all these refer to the Bangladesh war of 1971 but also deal specifically with the accounts of rape in 1971) shows that women from all socio-economic backgrounds encountered rape. This was also substantiated in the 1990s, when photographs and narratives of predominantly poor, rural, impoverished 'war heroines' like Kajoli, Rohima, and Moyna were published in news articles. Alongside, the narratives and photographs of the middle-class sculptor 'war heroine' Firdousi Priyobhashini (Akhtar 1999; 2001) also found prominence. For links between sexual violence and conflict (wars, riots, etc.), see Amnesty International (1993); Enloe (2000); Hicks (1994); Littlewood (1997); Panjabi *et al* (2002); Stiglmayer (1994); Zarkov (2001).

[2] Since these women were publicly acknowledging their history of sexual violence during the war and knew what I was working on, it allayed ethical issues regarding research about experiences of sexual violence.

[3] See Pitt-Rivers (1971) for explication of Simmel's arguments.

[4] In his ethnography on New Guinea, Herdt (2003) argues that secrecy is the lynchpin of moral order and male identity.

[5] I explore elsewhere (Mookherjee 2002) the relational, social, and contingent processes through which honour and shame are articulated.

[6] For varied accounts of the Bangladesh War of 1971 see F. Ahmed (1973); S. Ahmed (1992); S. Islam (1992); Mascarenhas (1971); Muhith (1992); Rahamana (1982-5); Sisson & Rose (1990); Williams (1972).

[7] According to official figures today, 200,000 women were raped. However, in other instances the stated number of women raped during 1971 has varied between 300,000 and 400,000.

[8] Butalia (1998), R. Menon and Bhasin (1998) and Das (1995: 55-83) have eloquently shown how the 'abduction' and 'recovery' of women across Hindu and Muslim communities during Partition of India in 1947 are dislocated from the status of events pertaining to family and community. Instead they become events marking the formation of the new nations of India and Pakistan, where the kinship norms of purity and honour are articulated in a public discourse. The modalities of recovery of the Muslim and Hindu women by India and Pakistan, respectively, were also perceived as a 'civilizational' measure of each nation.

[9] However, the history of rape has remained a topic of literary and visual media through the last thirty-five years in Bangladesh, thereby ensuring that the raped woman endured as iconic figures.

[10] Jahanara Imam (author of *Ekattorer dinguli* [The days of 1971] published in 1993), a woman from an upper middle-class family and mother and wife of martyred freedom fighters, gave leadership to the movement. She has become an iconic figure among the cultural elite as a mother figure who succeeded in mobilizing public opinion against the *moulobadis* ('fundamentalist' forces) and in favour of pro-liberation forces at a critical juncture of Bangladesh's history.

[11] The *Nirmul* (meaning to eradicate, exterminate, annihilate) Committee was aimed at 'eradicating' *razakars* (collaborators).

[12] Significantly rape camps were established in schools and factories in Bhashkhal, a town near Enayetpur. While the rapes in Enayetpur may be seen as based on chance, the binary between organized and random sexual attacks during wars does not identify the relationship between sexuality and militarization (Enloe 2000). Instead, as an organized military tactic, sexual violence during 1971 operated either in an institutionalized form through rape camps or through random uninstitutionalized attacks in women's homes and surroundings.

[13] Houses made of bamboo and straw were a marker of a poor household, while houses made of aluminium roof and walls were evidence of expendable income.

[14] Equivalent to 2 pence (1 GBP sterling was equivalent to 116.95 Bangladeshi *taka* at the time).

[15] *Barga* refers to a temporary lease of land on the basis of sharing the crop between the cultivator and the landowner, which is applied here for share-rearing the cow.

[16] The village pond is the hub of all sociability in Enayetpur for women after their day's work.

[17] For detailed accounts of Aisha and Fatima, refer to L. Ahmed (1992: 42-3, 69-72); Combs-Schilling (1989: 88-90); Roy (1983: 94); Spellberg (1991). A similar parallel exists in the Hindu pantheon of the chaste warrior virgins in Durga and Kali and the erotic, feminine wife in Parvati (Bennett 1983: 262, 274).

[18] Villagers who witnessed the events in Enayetpur in 1971, would, however, disprove these doubts. Parallels of this 'authentic' raped woman are found in N. Menon (2001: 92-5). She shows that rulings are made against the necessity of corroborative evidence in Indian rape trials on the assumption that in its 'tradition-bound society' 'innocent' women would be reluctant to level false accusations of rape as they would be unwilling to admit such an incident, which reflects on their chastity. This ruling also connotes that 'promiscuous' women would be motivated to hide their promiscuity precisely through such accusations. Hence the more sexually aware women are of their sexuality, the more obviously they express it, the less honest they would be about it and more likely to lie about it. In short, women who talk about rape lie.

[19] In Gilsenan's (1976: 216) account, one would be more fearful of what a silent man can do in the context of seeking revenge than of a man who voices his threats aloud. The notion of silence and its connotative intentionality operates differently in the case of the raped woman, and is instead a mark of her authenticity as raped.

[20] Butalia (1995: 62) shows that when recalling the 1947 Partition of India, people would refer to women as martyrs who had committed suicide in order to prevent conversion to 'other' religions.

[21] In villages only the statused, powerful, son-in-laws, or esteemed visitors sit on chairs. The poor usually sit on the ground, on their haunches, or remain standing. The three women fall within the latter category. The fact that they were given chairs to sit on in Dhaka by the statused and powerful is a signifier of the respect and importance they were accorded by the city people.

[22] Villagers refer to weavers as collaborators as in 1971 they stayed in Enayetpur, accompanied the Pakistani military, and provided them with food and assistance. Presently they are considered to be '*molla*' types or *moulobadis* (fundamentalists), thereby alluding to their stauncher Islamic beliefs.

[23] He validated that I was maintaining *purdah* by wearing a full-sleeved loose salwar kameez and using a *dupatta* 'properly' (covering my chest), even though I did not cover my head and moved around in public places.

[24] Kushtia is well known in Bangladesh as an area where various underground Marxist-Leninist Parties operate; these are referred to as *shontrashi* (anti-social/criminals). They are known for seizing resources from rich villagers. Also refer to Hartmann & Boyce (1983), Jahangir (1979), and White (1992) for discussions of the activities of these groups in the post-Independence period.

[25] In Enayetpur there is a predominant perception of 'Hindu' women as more beautiful.

[26] See Collard's (1989) description of Greek villagers who did not talk about their experiences during the Greek national and civil wars of 1940-50. Instead they describe events of the Ottoman occupation, which they could not have experienced. Collard argues that by ignoring their personal memories through historical accounts, people might have been trying to reckon with post-civil war changes.

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« Penser à oublier » : secret public et souvenirs des violences sexuelles pendant la guerre de 1971 au Bangladesh

Résumé

L'auteur examine les processus par le biais desquels le « secret public » du viol pendant la guerre de 1971 au Bangladesh opèrent dans le contexte ethnographique actuel. Elle étudie les commémorations contemporaines de la guerre et la célébration des femmes qui ont accédé à la gloire locale et nationale à la suite d'un viol (qui leur vaut l'appellation euphémique « d'héroïnes de la guerre »). L'article analyse l'écart entre la position nationale d'icônes de « l'honneur » des femmes violées et leur accueil local avec son lot quotidien de sanctions et de *khota* (remarques sarcastiques ou reproches, exprimant le mépris et évoquant les événements déplaisants). En explorant la relation entre mépris, honneur, viol, sexualité, narration de souvenirs et émergence des « secrets publics » (et leur intégration dans la subjectivité des victimes de viol), l'auteur affirme que les souvenirs de viol se situent, dans le même temps, au niveau des ambiguïtés de la révélation et de la dissimulation indispensables à l'exercice du pouvoir. L'article fait ainsi le lien entre secret et mémoire. Enfin, l'attention portée au domaine intersubjectif de la mémoire apporte des outils méthodologiques et éthiques permettant d'aborder les narrations du passé relatives aux violences en temps de guerre.

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