FOREWORD * VEENA DAS

"When I asked the women directly whether I should anonymize their names in my writings, they said that I should use their own names because it is "our own *kotha* (words), *mela itihash* (a lot of history), *ja ma tomare ditesi* [what mother we are giving to you (referring to me as "mother," which is an affectionate term used for younger women by older women)]." Nayanika Mookherjee receives the gift of this mela itihash, and the question that animates the book before us is, how is she going to bear this knowledge? The gift of knowledge has been bestowed upon her with the contradictory injunctions—the imperative to tell the story and also to not tell the story. Such dilemmas are not new for anthropologists studying sexual violence in situations of war or riots, in the streets, or at home. How to navigate the delicate terrain between public knowledge and public secret in which sexual violence lies? Yet every time one touches the subject, one encounters it as a fresh problem, for no general solutions or abstract advice will do.

Mookherjee understands well that writing this history is like touching madness. She writes an account, weaving her experiences with the *birangonas* who were subjected to sexual and physical violence during the war of independence in Bangladesh in 1971 and later declared as "war heroines" into a text that never loses sight of the concreteness of these women as flesh-and-blood creatures—not some idealized "victims" whose stories will serve a larger purpose in the name of this or that ideology. The achieved depth of this book and the theoretical humility with which concepts are drawn from the

everyday make it a profound work—one that will linger in the reader's mind as the significance of the words used, the stories told, the lists provided, or the orphan phrases that appear here and there, will only reveal themselves in slow motion. There is no direct access to the experiences of the women through such routes as sentimental empathy—or through analogies with one's own experiences—for each woman appears in the singular, and it is in their singularity that the confluence of forces that are at once social (e.g., politics in Bangladesh) and existential (the ability or inability to bear the child of the rapist) is revealed. Though I cannot do full justice to the themes that emerge in the book in this short foreword, I hope the points I touch on will serve as an invitation for deeper reflection on the sexual economies of war and their dispersal into other forms of violence with which we all live now in one way or another.

Unlike the stories of rape and sexual violation told within a judicial framework as in truth and reconciliation commissions or in court trials, the stories of the four women birangonas (war heroines) did not come out in one go. The contradictory affects with which the term comes to be infused in the local context—war heroines to be honored or soiled women to be shunned—serve as a warning to wait and learn what questions to ask. Thus Mookherjee waited, immersing herself in the daily talks and the everyday socialities of the village. She was sometimes invited by one of the women's husbands to visit and hear their story—sometimes others pointed out to her a family they felt she should visit and hear about their suffering. After all, a long time had passed between the time of the *ghotona* (event, incident) and the time of the telling. The story had gathered in on itself not only the memory of the original event but also how it was unearthed, combed—the expression Mookherjee uses repeatedly—by different kinds of actors and traded for the different values it carried. Mookherjee's delicacy of touch is visible in the subtle ways she wards off pressure on the women from husbands or friends to "narrate" what happened. She allows the experiences of different kinds of violations (and not by the soldiers of the Pakistani army alone) to seep through the ordinary expressions they use, sometimes by listening to what they want her to "overhear" and at other times by her attentiveness to expressions that arise unbidden and evoke the sorrow or the terror of being brutally violated.

For the linguist anthropologist used to "capturing" the precise speech through the use of tape recorders and then analyzing it in terms of an elaborate semiotic apparatus, this mode of collecting stories might seem suspect. But to the women who were subjected to the glare of media in the commemorative events in 1992 of the *Muktijuddho* (the war of 1971) without fully understand-

ing why they had been brought to these events or what their presence was testifying to, it was the tape recorder and a foreigner wishing to record their "testimony" that would have been threatening. Mookherjee traces with great patience the manner in which media attention, including the pictures of the birangonas in newspapers, circulated back to the village and became a major source of shame for the women, who were seen to violate the local codes of modesty and protection through silence. The ethics of storytelling here is not easy to discern, for the stories that might seem to perform the task of criticism in one domain (say, that of national publicity) might become lethal for the impact they have on the one whose story is being told—here the bearer of the story is not a generic raped woman but a woman with this kind of family history, this kind of local politics, and it is her singularity that is at issue, not her place in the general scheme of things.

What, then, is to tell one's story? Is it the same as being able to author it? In my own work on sexual violence, I have found it useful to think of the difference between speech and voice—for one does not always find one's voice in one's speech. Thus, Mookherjee shows how one of the women, Kajoli, tries to narrate what happened to her when she was raped but was interrupted again and again by her husband, who wanted to correct her on what really took place—for him, she did not know the events of the war well enough to be able to narrate them correctly. "All this time, Rafique was prompting her to speak louder and talk about the ghotona. Kajoli at this point told him that she should finish her work or she would not get paid. Rafique became quite annoyed, but I saw that Kajoli was reluctant to talk. I said I was tired myself, and we sat for some time in the courtyard chatting, and then I left." The power dynamics within the domestic are of a different order than the power dynamics through which national memory of the war was sought to be created through a visual archive of the photographs of birangonas or through the stories they were urged to tell. Yet in many instances, as in the case of the four women from Enayetpur who were taken to Dhaka without being given any explanation and thus found themselves unable to speak, it was the voice-over of the organizers through which their suffering was publicly told and displayed and their "demands" for justice were articulated. What happens to these women who are displayed as figures of abjection and desire, as they struggle to take back authorship that was wrested away from them, is rarely tracked into their everyday lives. In Mookherjee's analysis we see how the publicity strikes back at the women through the everyday evocation of *khota* (scorn) in the village as they and their families are stigmatized for having made their sexual violation public.

The story, then, is not a constant even when no one doubts that a rape occurred. It gathers other facts, gains weight or becomes frayed, waxes and wanes in intensity. In some cases women and their families want to trade the story of rape for material goods—money, government jobs, free education for their children. At other times the same families might heap scorn on the meager compensation they received or at promises of rehabilitation that are routinely broken. Other families might wish to hide the facts of sexual violation to avoid being expelled from the sphere of village sociality.

It was often alleged by various people in Bangladesh that women from respectable families who were raped never told their stories and that stories of rape were a ruse for poor women to extract something from the government. There were rumors about sexual violation of more powerful women—even the leader of the opposition and ex-Prime Minister, Khaleda Zia, was rumored to have been raped, or it was alleged that she had formed an alliance with a powerful general, putting her into the category of a collaborator. The nomadic lives of the stories that circulated were invariably accompanied by rumors, suspicion, doubts—there is an intensification of what I have elsewhere called the tempo of skepticism. But if the story was not constant, neither was the context.

First, there was the changing milieu of democratic politics and especially the opposition between the Awami League and the Bangladesh National Party, the two main parties whose rivalry gathered multiple meanings at the national and local levels. Ranging from such issues as what kind of Muslim country Bangladesh aspired to become, to claims over who was to be regarded as the true leader of the war of liberation, to issues that seeped down to the local level in terms of whose pictures were displayed in the house or what kind of patronage one was entitled to receive as a member of one or the other party, we see the astonishing reach of politics in every corner of life in Enayetpur and in the country in general. Second, there were multiple actors who emerged, each trying to place the specific issue of sexual and reproductive violence within the intense conflicts over identity—Bengali and Muslim—that kept changing shape. Thus the context was itself dynamic. One might have access to the context of one's life one day and lose it entirely another day. Thus women were able to read the politics of the family and of the village—the jealousy of a co-wife, the grief of a husband who had no other way to express himself except to refuse to sleep at home even though he did not abandon his wife after her rape—and all this affected the most quotidian matters such as the food one cooked and the most profound anxieties such as the possibility of being abandoned.

When it came to the ghotona—the event, incident of the rape—women struggled to understand what had made them so vulnerable. What role did their husbands' allegiance to Sheikh Mujib or to the *muktijoddhas* (liberation fighters) play in making them vulnerable to rape? As much as the sexual violence wounded them, the everyday politics of the village and the khota that burst out in everyday squabbles, in petty forms of revenge or insult, made the distant violence of the rape contiguous to everyday forms of violence. Mookherjee's masterful descriptions of village life lead us to ask: Do the slights, bitterness, betrayal, and perverseness that pervade intimate relations as well as lines of known enmity in the village give us a clue to how dramatic enactments of violence might be born out of the ordinary? How else to explain the sudden opportunities used by men to rape the daughter of a neighbor (a Hindu neighbor's daughter in one case) or to understand how *razakars* (collaborators who supported the Pakistani army) became the suppliers of women to the Pakistani soldiers? No general appeal to our humanity or to humanitarian reason will provide a therapy for such disasters here—but Wittgenstein's remark that the whole planet can suffer no greater torment than a single soul might help to orient us in this devastated landscape.

Perhaps the torment of this single soul is what makes Mookherjee trudge to other villages, to the offices of human rights organizations, and to the Muktijuddho Council or to search the massive literary and visual archive on the war to see how the story of sexual violation becomes also the story of the nation. Her analysis of the literary and visual archives blocks any sentimental, compassionate, or empathetic reading that can create a false sense of connection to the women or to the meaning of sexual violation for them. Mookherjee shows that a cultivation of suspicion toward the visual archive is not unwarranted, as in the example of the famous image of a soldier peering inside a loosened *lungi* (sarong) of a Bengali-looking man, which was read as a Pakistani soldier looking at the man's penis to see if he was circumcised and thus properly Muslim—though it turned out that the soldier was from the Indian army and was searching for hidden weapons carried by suspected collaborators. She does not, however, equate the mere cultivation of suspicion with criticism, as if that provided the resting point of the analysis—as if, once you have shown the misreading of a photograph or discerned its voyeuristic impulse, your task as a critic is over. Instead, Mookherjee lays out the full geography of the contradictions in the left-liberal secular intellectual discourse, in the practices of human rights organizations, in the obsessive politics of party rivalries, and in the hurts that families and villagers inflict on each other even as she documents efforts to provide succor, to impart justice, or to enshrine

the experience of the women as heroic in the national narrative of independence. This is one reason the book is fascinating in the details it unravels and also deeply disturbing, since it refuses to yield to our desire for criteria that would help us to unequivocally determine those who are virtuous and those we might detest. The form of criticism here is much more subtle than a simple search for the good. The obligation to respond to the violation that women suffered is an existential one, but the space it opens up is one in which we are encouraged to think of the birangona not as the haunted specter that would feed the imaginary of the nation but as one who has to make her life in the world in a mode of ordinary realism. Such realism is what we sense in the evocation of everyday forms of sustenance such as rice and cloth that women fear they might lose if their violation becomes public. But everyday life also nurtures aspirations that perhaps someone will open herself to one's pain. There is a poignant moment in the book when the four birangonas from the village give an account of their visit to the prime minister's house. They were given saris and money, but Sheikher Beti (Sheikh Mujib's daughter) did not have any time to talk with them. As Moyna, one of the birangonas mused, " 'If I had talked a bit with her about my sorrows, I would have kept it in my heart and remembered it again and again. The main thing was to cry with her and feel a bit light in the heart.' " In this movement between aspiration and disappointment, Mookherjee gives us a sign of what it is to inhabit life again. The *mela itihash, chorom itihash* (lot of history, severe history) is what Mookherjee was given—and it is that to which she has given her anthropological labor to produce this thoughtful account that is before us now and for which I am most grateful.