

# ‘...A Little Girl Who Owns a City and a River’: Girls on the Move During the 1971 War of Bangladesh in Lily Halder’s *Bhanga Berhar Panchali* and Sanchita Roy’s *Ongar*

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**Abstract:** Bangladesh has the distinction of being the first South Asian country to historically own the regional reality of nations being carved out of women’s bodies. Consequently, women who do not fit the ‘birangona’<sup>1</sup> or ‘muktijoddha’<sup>2</sup> categories have been effectively invisibilized. In my paper, I will look at Lily Halder’s *Bhanga Berhar Panchali* (*The Tale of the Broken Fences*) (2019) and Sanchita Roy’s *Ongar* (*Embers*) (2009), to examine two such un-categorized experiences during the 1971 War. The first book is the author’s autobiography and includes her involvement in the war effort while the second documents the experiences of crossing the border from East Pakistan to West Bengal during the war. In my paper, I will look at how these two authors ending up in the same city experienced migration differently as female adolescents in the texts, even when tied together by the same religion, same caste position, and the same event.

*Keywords:* War, migration, citizenship, woman, categories

## Introduction

My paper primarily focuses on the dialectic between the woman as the sign and the woman as the subject. I will attempt to examine the experiences of two adolescent girls occupying similar social rungs during the same event to understand a very fundamental negotiation, that between the individual versus the group, during a time of conflict, a war to be very precise. The construction of the poor immigrant woman needing rescue by or deportation from a host community (in this case the Indian nation) requires the uniformization of such women with varied experiences. It is not only helplessness, but also anger which is collectivised, sometimes deliberately and meticulously, to justify those ends. Following Brubaker, nation is a category of practice, not merely a category of analysis. Feelings of national belonging must be constantly reproduced via institutions and symbolic practices in order to keep the imagined community in existence, and secured through ‘compulsory participation in institutions such as schools, national language, military’ and ‘the consumption of national images, words, symbols in newspapers, art and so on, which tallies with Anderson’s analysis of the initiated community (Anderson, 1991)’ (Heaney). These ‘intra-institutional activities are contrasted with the extra-institutional political emotions created by communities of feeling (Berezin, 2002, p. 43)’ which are associated with collective action, collective violence and ritual. These rituals, or what might be called ‘state-framed communities of feeling’, lead to the consequent creation of ‘counter-state communities of feeling’, which are associated with social movements, and possibly with revolutionary movements and riots ‘... that serve as arenas of emotion, bounded spaces where citizens enact and vicariously experience collective national self-hood . . .’ (Heaney), thus making familiarity and identity co-terminous. The repeated experience of ritual participation produces a feeling of solidarity and collective memory. The passing of the 2019 CAA and its aftermath demonstrates this in the context of the issue of citizenship being dealt with in this paper.

### The Texts: Background and Reception

Lily Halder's *Bhanga Berar Panchali* is the first volume of her autobiography, and chronicles her poverty-stricken adolescence, her participation as a student in Bangladesh's Liberation Movement, her struggles in college and in her job as a Dalit woman availing reservation, her marriage, and finally her life as a poet and traveller who wants to give back to her community. Sanchita Roy's *Ongar* is a text that the author classifies as a memoir which details the journey of a young girl named Sudeshna from the erstwhile East Pakistan to West Bengal in order to escape the military crackdown during the war of 1971.

Lily Halder's *Bhanga Berar Panchali* was published in 2019. In the preface of this book written by Shashim Kumar Barui, he locates the work as a Dalit woman's autobiography. In the context of the little visibility of Dalit women authors in Bangla, Halder's autobiography is a remarkable achievement indeed, especially considering that she is actually a poet who is writing prose.

Two points in the preface seemed to me to be somewhat incongruent to the author's perspective in the book, though the fact that the preface has been included also displays the author's acceptance of that framework. Nevertheless, the gaps between the two exist, and I will spend a few words on them.

The first is Barui's idealization of Lily both as a Dalit woman and as a participant in the anti-Pakistan struggle. In a context where social and material emancipation of women is incongruently distributed across categories, it is a rather simplistic exercise for a man to make the claim that Dalit women are the most emancipated.

The other is specifically contextualising the book as giving a voice to Hindu refugees. Barui rightly points out the protracted nature of emigration from East Pakistan, where the more affluent, mostly upper caste people came into West Bengal following more immediate persecution during and after Partition, and the predicament following Jogendranath Mandal's disappointment in hopes of a Dalit-Muslim unity. But Barui also includes some statistics on Hindu emigration which are not referenced. To Barui's credit, he does not sentimentalise. The reader can trace his indignation at the atrocities that Lily had suffered as a Dalit woman, because those are also his indignations. But such framing makes it difficult to determine where the self of the woman ends and the community begins. It is not possible to know whether these incongruities would have existed for me as a reader had the preface been written by another Dalit woman author. Patricia Waugh has argued that the introduction of women's texts into the canon of autobiography has disrupted generic presuppositions because women have relational, or more fragmented selves. As a result, fiction and other people's biographies will inadvertently enter their 'autobiographies'.

Sanchita Roy's *Ongar* was published in 2009. I could not trace any academic or literary reception of that book and was informed of its existence only during my fieldwork. The book's short introduction is by Sabita Choudhury, where she testifies to the emotive power of the author, and concludes by writing that 'the evaluation of the author's writing is now in your (the reader's) hands'. It is not a critical introduction to the book, rather an affective one.

To proceed with the 'girls on the move' from the title, the East Pakistani woman had (and continues to have) various stereotypes among different groups of people both in Pakistan and in India, as can be found in the literatures of Intizar Hussain, Razia Fasih Ahmed and O. V. Vijayan, to name a few, so much so that the Bengali woman of 1971 continues being a trope serving various ends. She is a dark-skinned, sensuous, fiery figure in a *bindi* and a saree whose honour is the bone of contention among the groups of men involved. But woman (and man) is an essential category that it is a discursive category which has been constructed. With this I do not intend to remove the agency of women, rather as Judith Butler has argued, construction and agency are not inimical to each other. Rather construction forms the setting for agency, thus creating the space to study the relationship between agency and cultural constructions. In both the texts, while the relationships between the women populating them are mostly personal, the political and the public sphere, and even their excursions into the private, are inadvertently populated by men, something these women are acutely aware of.

Following from this, what with each person being an individual, the innumerable variations justify the individual accounts, countering the claims of some scholars that there has been a proliferation of 'trauma industry' as far as this particular war is concerned. In a world characterized by the increasing entry of the state into the lives of people in its efforts at paper-citizen formation, personalization and individuation are the easiest and most immediate means of humanization. That men have written more about their migration experiences and identities across class and caste categories in general, as have women with certain social capitals during the '47 Partition, subsuming many other narratives in the process which have emerged in subsequent Partition research (Butalia, et al) point towards this. Is it because individualism is more accepted in men who feel themselves to be enactors of larger sacrifices? Continued individuation and personalization through recognizing new subjectivities is what can sustain democratization of these pedagogies and scholarship.

### **The 'Bangladeshi' women**

As the above section indicates, the term 'woman' deserves problematization in this context because the effects of war (and violence in general) are not the same for all women. Experiences vary according to class, caste, age, time of migration, the various other social locations which help or restrict women to process the events even after the war, and finally, their individual disposition. There is need for a greater problematization of the idea of the Bangladeshi 'refugee' (in common parlance, immigrant factually) woman based on the various experiences and subjectivities that exist within that superimposed category. While today in India 'Bangladeshi' is a pejorative largely meaning the Muslim infiltrator, people of Bangladeshi descent in India consist of Partition refugees as well as the steady stream of immigrants which cascaded during the Liberation War in the border states of West Bengal, Assam, Tripura, and some other north-eastern states like Meghalaya.

So, it can be seen that the Bangladeshi immigrant woman is a complex, externally assembled category and therefore the notion of the agentive, liberated 'bengal' women would not adequately define them. This particular idea has been examined considerably in the context of '47 Partition (Chakraborty, et al), but needs examining for the migrant women in the subsequent years as well owing to the importance that is accorded to certain women in various communities, especially during this particular war. The inverse relationship between the progress in years and the diminishing of the respectability accorded to immigrant women seeking out sustenance in India is discussed by Archit Basu-Guha Chowdhury in his article 'Engendered Freedom: Partition and East Bengali Migrant Women'. Even the Partition women did not have it easy, as he writes that like in all patriarchal societies, the woman in a traditional Bengali family was allowed to tend only to the home while the man formed the economic backbone of the family. 'The outlook was not towards self-liberation but towards supplementing financial provisions for the family... The nascent stages of public duty vis-à-vis domestic duty were fraught with conflicts of gender in particular that were overcome only after gradual exposure to the outside world.' The women of the eastern half of Bengal appeared more liberated to the people of the western half because they were more proximate to the raw materials of production, as opposed to the gentrified and industrialised West (especially Kolkata). This was largely owing to self-respect movements like those among the Namashudras, and because they had an urgent need for employment after crossing the border. Nivedita Menon refers to Mark Galanter in her essay 'Is Feminism about 'Women'? A Critical View on Intersectionality from India' and writes that identities are fluid, and people respond through particular identities as subjects, rather than those identities being piled one on top of the other like essentials. I would like to modify this by saying that this is especially pronounced during periods of social volatility. This point of identity being the interplay of power relationships becomes pronounced when we see the affective, and then legislative and executive divisions, that occur based on the complicated reception of the East Bengali women over the years- while those during '47 are considered empowered in the national imagination, the latter are impudent.

The homogenization of women during state endeavours, specifically the citizenship exercises, erases their personhood and leaves them at the mercy of documents, something which women before the end of the twentieth century were not systemically empowered to possess. So delineating the pitfalls of categorization in real life is important to challenge the cluster of ideas which have evolved around the figure of the Bangladeshi refugee. As Nayanika Mookherjee writes: 'This infantilising model of Bangladesh is omnipresent in NGOs, international policies and national governments.... Bangladesh is truly the 'subaltern' (Guha 1983) within South Asian studies' (78).

This, in turn, points to multiple subalternizations— the Bangladeshi as the eternal subaltern, and the Bangladeshi Muslim and the Bangladeshi Dalit as two different groups of subalterns (the former being in respect to India). In accordance with this, Mookherjee writes: 'The complicated relationship between well-off migrant women who are seen to have agency by virtue of their symbolic and social capital, remain unexplored' (78). Of course, any Hindu Bangladeshi immigrant, though qualifying for recognition as refugee, should always be mourned as the eternal victim of Muslim persecution, but never be empathized with or treated as an equal, for any attempt at equality can only imply parasitism. Class is integral to this, as Sanchita Ray writes: 'Sudeshna always used to think, to these people they were like some demon from some alien planet. Uneducated junglees (sic). Maybe the locals did not think so much but she used to feel so. Maybe that was called 'inferiority complex'. It would happen if someone spent quite a few days in someone's place uninvited. A few times Sudeshna would go to a relative's door but remembering self-respect would return to the camp. And yet in spite of all this, something that made her feel good was that those people in her village whose feet almost did not touch the ground due to money and pride, they too would burn under the joishtho<sup>3</sup> sun in the tent with the other people. No soft beds, no electric fans' (58).

Popular media representations of the war would belie these complexities too, even though in both the texts discussed the women are very active participants in their lives and the world around them. While they undergo suppression, they conduct their family affairs, they participate in social movements, they create, and most importantly, they are educated. Both the women write in ample detail in multiple places about the books they had read, in the case of Sudeshna, the books she had to leave behind, and for Lily, the authors, poets and activists she had collaborated with while being affected by events herself. The point is not the contention of the existence of some 'true' subaltern (like the raped women, for instance, who do not speak by and large but rather the divergence of all media towards the creation of a particular refugee image, and its afterlife and implications).

This selective silencing has several consequences. First, it enables the victim-agent binary while identifying with the refugee who is poor and raped. Second, 'the agentive-victim argument gets differently framed to create a more empathetic identification with the middle class agentive refugees, which I would argue is linked to the aesthetics of war' (Mookherjee 89). Thus, the existence of middle-class immigrants to India following the war is conveniently overlooked, and the lower class-caste 'refugee' is to be both pitied and feared. The general body and person of the refugee was seen by both the 'ghotis'<sup>4</sup> and the earlier generations of 'bangals' as disruptive to sovereign and public health, thus creating affective borders, and this was compounded by the '71 refugees being mostly 'lower-caste' in number (Datta). 'Without an account of the multiplicity of migration experiences, what remains obscure is the gendered and classed relationships between refugees, something which is integral to the understanding of gendered social relationships during times of conflict' (Mookherjee 91). My primary reason for juxtaposing these two texts is to show that while both the girls who belong to the same religion and occupy the same caste position in the texts end up in Kolkata, their selves are formed differently in the texts even when they are tied to the same event. The distance increases with the climb up the social ladder, creating uneven control over representation and formation of subjectivity.

### **Limits of National Categories in Women's Articulations**

The concept of Birangona emphasises sacrifice through her rape, thus validating her social death and even enforced death. She has to obliterate herself in order to contribute palatably to the nation,

or is obliterated in 'historical' human rights discourse, as elaborated in detail by Nayanika Mookherjee when she writes about how the narratives of certain Birangonas were made to fit the image of the woman who is ashamed, sad, destroyed, abandoned after her rape. Otherwise, hinting at the presence of any social support for the rape victims within the particular frameworks that they inhabit, would imply an end to their trauma and put them back into the fold of 'normal' women. When a woman writes a memoir of 1971, she is a middle-class woman who has not been raped and has considerable political clarity and agency. The raped birangona never writes her own story. She is present only through her absence, leading a spectral, uncanny existence. She is a 'character' in other people's stories, further conflating the borders between genres, truth and fiction.

Then there is the eroticisation and commodification, unqualifiedly by men (but also consumed by women) of the birangona, which are beyond the purviews of this paper. Enloe writes that the 'tendency of masculinist discourses of war to generalise women as victims (and men as the militia) [divert] the gaze from exactly the 'conditions and decisions' that turned them into casualties in the service of nationalist mobilisation'(Das 2:4).

Of course, there are deviations within these frameworks and parameters. To activist credit, in Bangladesh there has been an effort to bring under the notion of 'muktijoddha' the non-militant women who engaged in caregiving work. As can be seen in works like Helena Khan's 'Virangana' and Shaheen Akhtar's *Talaash*, literature becomes a means of both introspection and catharsis. Fiction with birangonas from mid-1970s to the 1990s 'pointed out the uncomfortable history of society's complicity with rapists and mapped the atrocities perpetrated by collaborators onto the history of rape' (Mookherjee 209).

Narratives beyond nationalist purviews like the texts that I deal with in this paper have better formed subjects with agency, like the Bangladeshi women memoirists. Nevertheless, it is important to look at how war trauma becomes a mere continuation of these women's other lived experiences (and vice-versa) in the context of the gendered nation-state in these two texts. In the texts themselves, Lily is threatened by male political activists, and Sudeshna's (and her family's) flight is premised precisely on her pubescence. This contextualization is necessary in order to examine the motivations and influences under which the interior is exteriorized over time within a framework where the cut-off date for Indian citizenship is effectively 24<sup>th</sup> March, 1971<sup>5</sup>, with women also being among the worst affected during the Assam NRC process. Robin Neustaeter's definition of peace is relevant here: 'While peace is the absence of violence, it is not the absence of conflict. Peace is collaborative, just, and nonviolent responses to conflict' (168). Lily Halder's father, who moved to Kolkata with his father in 1946, fails to uphold standards as a parent during the crisis brought on by the 1971 war. His sudden and extreme religiosity during the financial crisis in West Bengal following the war makes him neglect his son's health leading to the latter's death. He recklessly spends the little money that he earns on godmen, thus pushing both Lily and her mother to resort to health-shattering labour that has long-term consequences especially for the mother. Yet he reclaims his role as the patriarch in charge of his daughter's public politics when he refuses to allow her to join Maulana Bhashani's<sup>6</sup> poetry initiative 'Hakkatha' at the Swadhin Bangla Betar Kendra as that might 'attract trouble'. This, though her regular life consisted of participating in the war effort (the reader is not intimated about whether her father knew about this) like listening to and supporting liberation fighters who had come to her school, walking in processions, writing poems, and dealing with the various other difficulties that had cropped up in West Bengal during the war which she details minutely. She is very precise in her words: 'No, nobody taught us anything in those days. We used to do these things from the inside'(70). As for the slightly younger Sudeshna, for whom the events that are described are more immediate and less analyzed, the war days are almost a catastrophic break from her seemingly peaceful life in East Pakistan. And yet in terms of the changed course of her life's direction even after the return of national stability, her expanded understanding in terms of the events she witnesses, and most prominently through her raped friend Polly, who is reduced to a

permanently vegetative state after her rape<sup>7</sup> and which affects Sudeshna deeply, the war gets firmly situated within the historical paradigm of the 'everyday', as opposed to an aberration or 'madness', or even an out of normal experience through which war is generally defined, or how it comes across in superimposed processes of documentation and commemoration.

Under such circumstances, where even apparently restorative state exercises are actually disruptive to the lives of numerous women, it is very difficult to draw clear boundaries between peace and conflict, friend and foe, trauma and triumph.

### The Woman as a Subject in the Texts and the City

'Bachelard (1994: 4), writing on the poetics of space, differentiates a geographical or an ethnographical study of 'home' from a phenomenological one which would 'seize upon the germ of the sure, immediate well-being it encloses' (Chanda 5). But such affective economies of well-being are not constructed adequately, if at all, owing to the general silence that pervades discussions on gendered responses. These silences are conveyed very subtly through writing, thus framing them within expression. While Sudeshna had to leave behind the place of her birth, Lily was sent to her grandmother at Durbajpur as a child to decrease the pressure on her parents who subsequently had two sons. While Lily was brought back to the city in 1961 by her father to be admitted to the school and grew up to be the primary caregiver of her family, Sudeshna did not return with her family once Bangladesh came into being but was sent to Delhi under the guardianship of her mama<sup>8</sup>, and she does not specify the reason behind this. These women were moved to and fro in their formative years, and coupled with other experiences of dislocation and pain, there is a sense of their selves being constructed as an outsider in the texts, which could be the result of their aforementioned sense of dislocation being compounded by their dislocation from their own families. To sum it up in Chanda's words: 'What hopes and dreams does she harbour that cause her to break the mould of the 'girl'? How does she struggle to fulfil these dreams and hopes? When and why is she happy and what makes her yearn for the safe comfort of home where nothing is to be worried about and all is taken care of, until this unrippling calm becomes deadly boring?' (17), the last part being a constant negotiation between force and agency in the case of these girls.

Women experience the city differently in the sense they are constrained by restrictions arising from traditional gender roles and positions. And what is immensely essential in all instances of survival in a city like Kolkata for women who have considered themselves perpetual outsiders are the homosocial bonds, mostly formed with other women with relatable experiences who help each other by transmitting knowledge or through direct contact. The city of Kolkata is not some utopia, but often a place that is the most convenient, mostly due to the cheap rates and the well-connected transport system. Of course, there are variations in each of these experiences, for instance, Lily having a better knowhow of the city as compared to Sudeshna, which also enables her to look at the war and the refugees more objectively. Elspeth Probyn's definition of gender is the most suitable here (1993: 3): 'gender must be represented as processes that proceed through experience ... ways to talk about individuation without going through the individual and that I can talk about my experience of being in the society without subsuming hers' (Chanda 16).

When it comes down to forming their selves within the city(s), even when both women perform citizenship in the most basic sense of the term by continuously evaluating, negotiating with, and trying to improve their lives and of those around them, Lily comes out as the more empowered woman. Being the daughter of Partition immigrants, Lily has an innate sense of legitimacy that makes her acutely aware of, and fight for, her rights. She belongs somewhere, even if that place is constantly threatened. In her narrative, she displays an awareness of her difference from the Marichjhapee refugees as well as the relatives from East Pakistan who were seeking refuge at her place during the war. For Sudeshna though, rights are something she must constantly look for and come up with. While that effectively makes her more agentive, since she doesn't have a certain

place, dislocation and dissociation pervade her entire life. For Lily, politics is something that she can critique, that she can form, that she can participate in, and most significantly, she can put to writing. For Sudeshna in *Ongar*, 'rajneeti' (politics) is 'shorbonasha niti' (the principle of destruction) (62).

### Genre: Autobiography, Testimonio or Fiction?

Since my paper is on uncategorized experiences, I look at how they have been expressed, and the role writing plays in documenting both the words and the silences. Lily Halder's is an autobiography that focuses more on her caste subjectivity than on the war, while Sanchita Roy's work is a document doing the opposite, and having a lead with a different name at that. These beg the question— can these be considered testimonios? I would say yes, because that is one mode of specifically feminist pedagogy that balances the individual politically within the collective. The ever-continuing debates regarding generic specifications notwithstanding, the relationship among testimonio, autobiography, and what qualifies as literature in this particular context merits attention (notably, Lily epigraphs each of her chapters with one of her own poems). What are the yardsticks for such categorizations? Derrida in his 'The Law of Genre' writes about the persistent exclusionary characteristic of genre formation, so what might get excluded in the claims of a piece of writing being 'literary'? Leigh Binford writes that testimonio is a hybrid form that represents 'the conversion of oral testimony into writing'. 'By equating history and literature with writing (and modern culture) and folktales and testimonies with orality (and traditional culture),' Western intellectuals like Levi-Strauss 'have vigorously defended their disciplines in order to prevent their contamination by an indigestible Other'. 'But testimonio, written like literature and occasionally endowed with recognizable artistic merit' (Binford 16–17), demands thinking about the category of Literature itself, and the limits and exclusions that the discipline encompasses.

In other words, the works which I consider here, regardless of the degrees of fictionalisation that they follow, qualify as testimonios, with their implications of loss and recovery, of what is missing and what is possible, featuring 'interplay between lament and resistant promise, between oppressed individuals and the awakening collective' (Foster 65). Any writing which speaks of a larger political truth, especially a subverting one, has testimonial features.

Both Lily and Sanchita adopt occasional modes of distancing, especially between their purported past and their present selves. Lily Halder begins her account with 'She ('Shey' in Bengali) was born in the year 1957....'. She shifts to the first person only in the second paragraph with an act that is among her earliest memories of subjecthood— 'In my childhood when I used to walk along the village path....' (21).

The relationship between the different selves is even more complicated in Sanchita Roy's case. In her foreword, she writes

The incidents in this book are not merely imaginary pictures, they are my family's awful experiences. The experiences which are the same as that of thousands of other families. A huge section of the readership is of those who had not been born then, a section of those who were very young then— those who had heard only stories from their mothers and fathers. Another section is like me, who are eyewitnesses, the victims of bitter experience. For everyone, this is a small attempt from me. Some might have been erased from my memory, for which my apologies to the other eyewitnesses.

And yet, the entire account that follows is through the eyes of a character called Sudeshna. We do not know the relationship between the author who owns the experiences in the foreword, and the narrator. What is the purpose of the construction of 'Sudeshna'? This ambiguity is not uncommon among women leading doubtful existences within political contexts, in the sense that they do not get the chance to form coherent, secure selves under immense pressure, which the idea of traditional, factual, even historical autobiographies demand. Also, the self is necessarily fictitious, formed as it is by recollection, reconstruction and other's perceptions (Evans). We get a similar ambiguity in Aquila Ismail's *Of Martyrs and Marigolds*, where the relationship between the author evoking witness

and the narrator of the story is not clearly delineated. Both these authors have a considerable distance from the selves that they are creating in their texts. We do not know where the author ends and the reader begins, especially in texts where there clearly is an invitation to imagine and construct. This brings forth a few questions which will be looked at better in the next section- who is the imagined reader? What is the purpose of the construction of the text? And what purposes can these texts serve?

### Some Questions

As we see from the above, boundaries between the public and the private become stronger as one climbs up the social order, and this creates a disjuncture in the formulation and enactment of refugee relief initiatives. It also leads to alienation of the women from their own experiences- the post-Partition sacrifices do not have as much respectability owing to their dilemma at not having followed the two-nation theory, and this shame compounds the other shames which might be present- of physical and mental violation, of being vulnerable to their own men who might exploit them for both economic and political ends<sup>9</sup>, of being vulnerable to men (and women) in the host communities, and the like.

This in turn leads to a very important concern- the defining and the appropriation of trauma. In the face of the effect of any inflicted violence extending across generations, what is war trauma exactly? This contextualisation is necessary in order to examine the motivations and influences under which the interior is exteriorised over time. During a war, the very mechanisms that are supposed to protect a citizen turn against them. But do they return to normal once the war ends? What are the implications of agency as far as this particular aspect is concerned- where does the self end and the state begin?

The question of agency vis a vis state (through documentation) becomes important in the light of the fact that a spectrum is formed between the two, with citizenship exercises where all subjectivity is erased in the face of the larger state machinery being the extreme manifestation of the latter. As this affected all women, cascading down due to the pyramid effect characterising most social inequities, this merits the questions- in the nation's inability to conceive women as natural citizens during its practice as mentioned in the introduction, is the state specifically anti-women<sup>10</sup>? In this question, I include both cis-women and trans-women.

Referring back to the section where I cited Patricia Waugh's notions about the impact of women's fragmented selves on life writing, I would like to further qualify those fragments in the context of my texts as fragments of memory, remembering itself being inherently a selective process (something both Halder and Roy acknowledge in their texts). Under such circumstances, 'academic' research can only proceed by acknowledging the gaps among these fragments. In other words, it is concepts, whatever their form, that fill up those fragments. To add to that, 'War and conflict are events that in most cases imply a shift in discourse and ideology' (Michielsens, 184-185), making writing an autobiography an act committed by multiple selves. Generic stratifications under such circumstances can be very difficult to hold on to.

As Magda Michielsens writes, the dominant challenge is making old contexts relate to the new. For instance, Barui classifies Rashshundari Devi, born into a wealthy zamindar family, as a marginal woman. Which she indeed was in her time, but in the 21st century, can a woman born in a family with the wealth of a zamindar, even if oppressed, be marginal? What I have observed in these texts though, is the opposite - that certain times and spaces of history can invade our present even though we did not inhabit those junctures. These texts testify to that. And in more unholy ways, certain markers, be they texts, images, or ideas, can be kept alive to serve larger community projects.

### Conclusion

The women taking centre stage in this paper are effectively peace activists. The intention here is not essentializing women as inherently peaceful beings, but rather acknowledging and enhancing



the role they might play in building peace. This is important considering the fact that women's traditional caregiving roles are regarded as domestic and valueless and even anti-feminist in certain contexts. And while Lily receives some state acknowledgment for her initiative as a student (she was awarded by Bangladesh's Vidyasagar Society in 2012), there is no specific name for the kind of work that both Lily and Sudeshna did (and continue doing) during and after the war. It entailed 'new opportunities (Bop 2001) and new responsibilities—most notably economic provisions—for their families, but also new forms of management, decision-making, and administrative tasks, such as dealing with officials and governments' (Mookherjee 76).

As Robin Neustater writes, 'These public acts of caring occur within the everyday routines of living (work, play, sleep, eat, etc.) and are normalized so that they often are only noticed by their absence or a complaint (Dominelli, 1995)' (167). In the texts, Lily Halder and Sudeshna both grow up to be married women firmly located within their communities, and display degrees of selfhood based on their participation in their society. And neither of these women, even when writers and poets themselves, set out as radical revolutionaries taking on the society but as democratic participants wanting to make their lives, and those of the people around them, better. They do not conceive it as a matter of the self versus the society, but how the society and the self sustain each other even when the relationship is not always amiable.

It is going to be a long time before women de facto qualify as citizens, even those performing traditional womanhood. As Mrinalini Sinha has pointed out, to 'bring a global perspective to gender' means not seeing the world through a universalising perspective, but 'taking theoretical cognisance of the local and empirical,' thus producing a 'dense contextual analysis.' This move would protect us against two tendencies—'false analogies between different historical formations,' and naturalising the present, thus limiting the possibilities of the future. It would also open us to a feminist politics 'whose concepts and strategies are flexible enough to respond to changing conditions'.

At the same time, it needs to be remembered that '...the state is never a unified and transparent entity in itself as to interpret, correctly or incorrectly, identities around it' (Menon). Because as these texts demonstrate, such voices already exist. 'Women's community peacebuilding experiences and initiatives are rooted in the local context far away from the elite-level peace players and processes, such as high-level diplomacy and peace-treaty negotiations' (Neustater 169), stemming from and leading back to the point that women are not de facto citizens. The need is to look at how intersections function during strenuous experiences like community conflict, and work at the deficient areas of power in those identity relations accordingly.

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### Notes

\* All English translations of portions from *Ongar* and *Bhanga Berhar Panchali* are mine.

<sup>1</sup> The term used by Sheikh Mujibur Rehman to refer to the raped women of East Pakistan in his efforts at integrating them within the new nation.

<sup>2</sup> Liberation war fighter, and in the case of the numerically far lesser recognised women, who were combatants. The nurses and other such caregivers were also included within its ambit.

- <sup>3</sup> The month of 'jyestha' in the Saka calendar, corresponding to high summer.
- <sup>4</sup> Term for the Bengalis indigenous to West Bengal.
- <sup>5</sup> The last day before the launching of West Pakistan's military offensive against the eastern wing, also the cut-off date in the 1974 Indira–Mujib Accord.
- <sup>6</sup> Also known as the 'Red Maulana', Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani was an influential political figure in East Bengali and East Pakistani politics.
- <sup>7</sup> Polly does not return to Bangladesh either. And nor do notions like victory and freedom mean anything to her.
- <sup>8</sup> Bengali for maternal uncle.
- <sup>9</sup> For instance, in *Ongar*, women like Milu's thamma (paternal grandmother) get randomly abandoned by their own families just because they can.
- <sup>10</sup> There has already been considerable theorising on this (see MacKinnon, Hoffman, Pateman, Mukhopadhyay and Singh). From all of this, what I would like to filter out is that participation in the public sphere, taken as crucial to citizenship, does not extend to women or the non-cis-heterosexual.

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