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Praxis

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The Department of English
University of Rajshahi

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Editorial Preface

Praxis: Journal of the Department of English, University of Rajshahi is committed to maintaining rigorous academic and ethical standards in the publication of scholarly research in the English language, linguistics, and literature. As a double-blind peer-reviewed journal, *Praxis* ensures that all submitted manuscripts undergo an impartial and thorough evaluation process, safeguarding both academic integrity and intellectual merit.

The journal adheres strictly to a policy of originality. Submissions are unpublished and not be under consideration for publication elsewhere. Any form of plagiarism, including self-plagiarism, is considered a serious breach of academic ethics and results in immediate rejection. Authors are responsible for ensuring the authenticity of their work and for properly acknowledging all sources in accordance with recognized citation standards.

To maintain disciplinary coherence while encouraging intellectual diversity, *Praxis* accepts contributions primarily within the fields of English studies, linguistics and English Language Teaching. Interdisciplinary work is welcomed, provided it demonstrates a clear and substantive engagement with these core areas. All manuscripts are written in English and follow either the MLA (9th edition) or the APA (7th edition) style, depending on the disciplinary orientation of the paper.

The journal enforces a structured submission protocol. Manuscripts fall within the prescribed length and include an abstract and a brief author bio-note. Submissions are accepted in both print and digital formats, prepared according to specified formatting guidelines. To ensure equitable representation, each author is permitted to submit only one manuscript per volume. In cases of joint authorship, full disclosure of all contributors and their institutional affiliations is required.

The editorial board reserves the right to make necessary revisions for clarity, coherence, and consistency without altering the substantive argument of the work. Final decisions regarding publication rest solely with the editorial board, based on reviewers' recommendations and the journal's standards. Individual authors, and not the Editorial Board, are responsible for the views expressed in their writting.

Through these policies, *Praxis* seeks to uphold excellence, transparency, and fairness in academic publishing, fostering a scholarly environment that values critical inquiry, methodological rigor, and intellectual responsibility.

In Memoriam: Professor Dr. Idris Ahmed

Md. Sakhawat Hossain

I had the privilege of being a direct student of Professor Dr. Idris Ahmed, and the memory of his classroom remains one of the most formative experiences of my intellectual life. He was not a teacher of abundance in number, but of precision and distinction; he took relatively few classes, yet each one bore the mark of rare excellence. His lectures were events that were often animated, lucid, and deeply engaging, without ever obscuring the depth of his scholarship.

What set him apart most strikingly was his method. He had the remarkable ability to render even the most extended and complex texts into something graspable without diminishing their intellectual weight. With a lightness of touch and a finely tuned sense of humour, he guided students into the depths of a text as if it were the most natural of movements. His wit was never ornamental; it was pedagogical and it was an instrument through which difficulty dissolved and insight emerged. Many of his students would testify that his classes were filled with mirth, yet never lost their seriousness of purpose.

In demeanour, he was at once formal and disarmingly intimate. His English was impeccable, measured, and refined, reflecting a deep command of language and tradition. Yet he was not bound by rigidity; at moments, he would slip into Bangla, often to delightful effect, using humour to draw students closer into the discussion. He had a characteristic habit of addressing students as “thou,” a gesture that seemed to collapse distance while invoking an older, almost Shakespearean intimacy. Standing before the class, he maintained an alert and penetrating gaze so that no student could afford inattentiveness, yet none felt excluded or disengaged. His presence commanded attention without coercion.

His intellectual range was formidable. He possessed a sharp and integrated knowledge of English literature, history, philosophy, and the broader Christian and Western intellectual traditions. Yet his scholarly vision was not confined within conventional disciplinary boundaries. His doctoral work on the literary techniques of *Surah Yasin* remains a landmark contribution that demonstrates his courageous attempt to bring Islamic textuality into the sphere of literary criticism. In doing so, he opened a space for dialogue between traditions that are too often kept apart.

Born on 31 December 1938, Professor Dr. Idris Ahmed completed his MA in English from the Department of English, University of Rajshahi, in 1960, and qualified in the then Special East Pakistan Civil Service (EPCS) examination. He joined the Department of English at the University of Rajshahi on 10 March 1973 and served there with distinction until his retirement as Professor on 30 December 2004. He passed away on 16 May 2022, leaving behind a legacy of intellectual brilliance, pedagogical excellence, and humane values.

Dedication

Professor Dr. Idris Ahmed
(31 December 1938-16 May 2022)

This Volume is dedicated to the cherished memory of Professor Dr. Idris Ahmed—a teacher of rare brilliance, a scholar of profound humanity.

Contents

Of Memory, Trauma, and Embodiment: Exploring Sexual Violence in Shaheen Akhtar's *The Search*

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Abstract

Bangladeshi novelist Shaheen Akhtar's novel *The Search* (translated from the original Bangla novel *Talaash* into English by Ella Datta) explores some of the darkest truths of the Bangladesh Liberation War in 1971. Revolving mainly around Mariam, a Birangana (literally, a war heroine), the novel delineates the turbulent and excruciating journey of the rape victims of the Bangladesh Liberation War. While Biranganas embody the scars, ignominy, trauma, and painful memories of humiliation in the hands of the Pakistani army and its local collaborators, they are forced to encounter further ordeals in their free motherland. Many have become vulnerable to exploitation, insecurity, petty politics, and social boycott in an unwelcoming society. As they have lost autonomy and agency over their bodies, they become embodiments of bodily shame, social discomfort, and traumatizing memories. Virtually silenced by a patriarchal society itself loudly silent about their existence except for rhetorical purposes, political expediency, and national/historical narrativization, the Biranganas are a poignant reminder of patriarchy's own insecurities and contradictions. Applying insights from feminist theories, Memory Studies and Trauma Studies, this qualitative paper endeavors to excavate the traumatic depths of harrowing memories of the Biranganas and expose patriarchy in the light of *The Search*.

Keywords: Birangana, trauma, memory, rape, feminism

Introduction

In her fictional and non-fictional works, Shaheen Akhtar "consistently attempts to provide a viewpoint that challenges norms, resulting in insightful renditions of common, but unnoticed or ignored, social experiences" (Rahman). Her *The Search* (translated from the original Bangla novel *Talaash* into English by Ella Datta) brings into literary discourse the unimaginable scale of human tragedy suffered by thousands of women and girls in the Bangladesh Liberation War in 1971. Centered around Mariam and other Biranganas such as Anuradha, Parul, Tuki, and Shyamali, the text seeks to articulate the (nearly) muted or silent agonies and struggles of the tragic victims of the Liberation War. Thanks to Mukti (born at the beginning of the Liberation War) who has laboriously interviewed a few Biranganas, a long hushed-up history came to the surface throughout the novel. Ironically, the unending humiliation and dehumanization of the Biranganas have not been amply expressed, authentically represented, and creatively imagined in the Bangladeshi literary domain. This is perhaps due to the fact that wartime rape is intended to "destroy female bodies as an expression of male chauvinism on the part of the masculinized military" willing to render their enemy communities effeminate (Mithun 136). *The Search,* hence, unsettles the collective embarrassment of the Bengali nation emanating from rape and various other forms of sexual assault of thousands of their women whose bodies "became the theater on which to exercise power by the Pakistani servicemen and their Bengali collaborators" (137). In addition, the text also exposes the many cracks and crevices in Bangladesh's history that simultaneously glorifies and nullifies/downplays (Birangana) women's contribution to the nation's political liberation from Pakistan. This ambivalent attitude toward the Biranganas leads to a virtual

denial and selective silence on the part of the mainly patriarchal Bangladeshi/Bengali society with regards to the traumatic and tragic experience of the former.

Applying an interdisciplinary approach drawing upon theoretical and critical insights from Trauma Studies, Memory Studies and Feminism, this paper aims to (a) explore the patriarchal politics regarding the female body as portrayed in Shaheen Akhtar's *The Search,* and (b) scrutinize the traumatic experiences and memories of the Biranganas. The qualitative study is conducted by using a content analysis method where the novel *The Search* serves as the primary text while a few selected review articles, research papers, academic essays, theory-related books, and history books have been used as crucial and useful secondary texts. Textual analysis of *The Search* has been complemented by theoretical discussion pertaining to both Trauma Studies and Memory Studies. In addition, feminist perspectives are applied to understand the patriarchal politics underlying the female body-centric discourses, which are also responsible for enhancing trauma and creating painful memories among female war victims in general and Bangladeshi ones in particular.

Memory Studies and Trauma Studies: A Brief Discussion

Memory Studies seeks to investigate how memory performs, evolves, changes, gets erased, distorted, edited, modified, promoted, valued, and devalued. It "examines how memorialization can happen, what shapes it takes, and what it means." (Kaplan 7). It also excavates "literature, art, music, and many other forms to find out how memory matters" (7). Memories have deep social roots since it is in society where people "normally acquire, … recall, recognize, and localize their memories" (Halbwachs 38). Indeed, memory can be both individual and collective.

The process and method of remembering is not always innocent or apolitical. In effect, memorization, memorialization, and commemoration are intrinsically political. Remembering cannot be thought of without taking into account the act of forgetting. Esposito says, "remembering and forgetting always proceed together…. There must be something that can be remembered, but one must forget almost everything" (182). The very process of remembering and forgetting is, hence, mutually constitutive. Manipulation of memory is an undeniable fact as the "past is not destroyed or relegated to oblivion but rather undergoes selection and a complex coding process by which it is placed in storage so that under certain conditions it may resurface" (Tamm 140). Certain memories are privileged at certain times while others are systematically hidden or obfuscated. Even the memories occluded once may get revived if occasions demand so. There is, of course, a nexus between power and remembering/forgetting. Hence, the process of remembering and forgetting is intrinsically political.

Trauma Studies, on the other hand, intends to explore how trauma operates in different stages of a traumatic event and long after it. It also seeks to understand what qualifies as trauma and why it needs to be taken seriously. Trauma is "clinically understood as overwhelming emotional experiences that cannot be coped with and integrated into the person's existing inner world" (Maček 4). Caruth opines in *Unclaimed Experience* that "trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual's past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature—the way it is precisely *not known* in the first instance—returns to haunt the survivor later on" (4). In effect, as Caruth says, "the most direct seeing of a violent event may occur as an absolute inability to know it" (92). Trauma is difficult to pin down, explain, and recognize at the initial stage of occurrence only to manifest itself later as a horrifying and haunting phenomenon battering the victim psychologically and emotionally. Initial denial and eventual articulation are a trademark of trauma for many a survivor as his/her predicament is underscored

by “a conflict between the will to deny horrible events and the will to proclaim them aloud” (Herman 1). This contradictory urge to suppress and accentuate the experience characterizes trauma as a paradoxical sort of drama played out in the life of the survivor.

Despite preliminary silence, trauma intends to assert itself in multidirectional ways and manners as “traumatization need not necessarily conclude in a state of involuntary, deeply conflicted silence” (Stampfl 16). Trauma has a long-term effect and is a multi-phase event. In her book *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (1992), Judith Lewis Herman classifies Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) in 3 categories, which are: (1) Hyperarousal (which involves sudden startling, irritable reaction to small instigation, sleep deprivation, etc.); (2) Intrusion (when memory of the traumatic incident appears as flashbacks during waking states and traumatic nightmares while asleep); and (3) Constriction or numbness (which is underscored by a detached calm, indifference, emotional detachment, and a detached situation of consciousness (qtd. in Berk 201). A traumatized person undergoes a certain amount of cognitive dissonance as PTSD “causes hyper and irrational responses to situations or “signs”—responses, which seem unmerited in a given context—as the normative population would experience it” (Harper 378). Trauma Studies discusses all these manifestations of trauma and more.

Memory Studies and Trauma Studies in Conversation with Feminism: Textual Analysis

Shaheen Akhtar’s *The Search* offers a complex interplay between memories, trauma, and feminist resilience. As a piece of fiction, it demonstrates how memory performs. Kaplan says, “Fiction… is also theory, also theorizes memory, and makes its readers grasp in profound ways how sticky memory can be” (3). *The Search* deals with the most inconvenient of public and individual memories with regards to the Bangladesh Liberation War because the “simultaneously embedded and extended quality of literature… is uniquely suited to represent memories that lie outside the official records of recollection” (Parui 96). Being a literary text, *The Search* is best poised to touch upon those memories often overlooked either through chance or choice. The very excavatory power of literature with its focus on the imaginary and intersubjectivity makes it the best route and medium through which even the uncomfortable and uneasy pasts could be articulated and made relevant. Fiction articulates “the presentness of the past, the struggle many of us have to move beyond certain pasts and the contradictory need to dwell in those memories while simultaneously living in the present” (Kaplan 3). As “the liminal landscape between reality and fantasy, between actuality and possibility,” fiction provides a unique opportunity to scrutinize and experience “the entanglement of remembering and forgetting, between what really happened and what gets left behind” (Parui 93-94). These exceptional capacities of fiction/literature enable Shaheen Akhtar to bring forth the sensitive historical truths by combining imagination and factuality in such a way that inspires empathy for the Biranganas.

In *The Search* Shaheen Akhtar does exactly the same as that of the African-American novelist Toni Morrison, who in her novels including *Beloved* addresses the lacunae in historical documents, records and archives, and “the gaps that she discovers are the wounds in memory itself, the scar of a trauma that resisted representation and can only belatedly, long after the deeply destructive events, become articulated in the framework of a literary text” (Assmann 106). *The Search* negotiates “the gaps in historical records and archives” (106) by intermingling hard facts with imagination, opening up the possibilities of expressing the inexpressible traumatic incidents of rape, molestation, humiliation, and bloody murders. This testifies to literature’s expressive capacity since literature, in its multifarious expressions and theoretical manifestations, has “played an important role in the representation, the transmission, and the critical (or

mystifying) elaboration of traumatic events" (Fortunati and Lamberti 130). *The Search*, likewise, foregrounds how memory and trauma intertwine in shaping the identity of the protagonist Mariam and other Biranganas, exposing how historical memories and traumatic events are politicized in the national(ist) discourses of Bangladesh, and illustrating how patriarchy remains a powerful tool in the almost-perpetual subjugation of the Biranganas. In an interview with Sarah Anjum Bari, Shaheen Akhtar says that *Talaash* (the Bengali original of *The Search*) "demanded reconstruction of post-war memories, and for them to break and expand beyond the shackles of the war. Otherwise, many stories of oppression would be discarded and erased" (Akhtar, Daily Star). Hence, the insights of Memory Studies, Trauma Studies and Feminism will be combined in analyzing *The Search* to see to what extent it has played its role in expressing historical truths.

The agonizing memories of the Liberation War days and beyond haunt Mariam as well as numerous other Biranganas in multifarious ways. Mariam/Mary was born into a conservative Muslim family from an East Pakistani village. As a teenager, she became a topic of scandal as she went to a cinema hall with her beloved Jashim. Later, she was sent to Dhaka for pursuing higher education and also to ensure her scandal got erased from public memory. In her Dhaka days, she got involved in a relationship with Abed Jahangir, a student leader who actively participated in the Bengali nationalist movement. Abed abandoned Mariam, whom he had impregnated, and joined the Liberation War as a Freedom Fighter. In a tragic turn of events, Mariam ended up in the hands of the Pakistani military as the Liberation War began in 1971. All through the war, she underwent brutal rape and all sorts of humiliation in the Pakistani military camps. After the war, her dilemma exponentially increased as she encountered further rejection, betrayal, subjugation, and dehumanization from her family, friends, and others.

The storyline of the novel revolves around Mariam's life trajectories and those of other Biranganas. Memories of trauma and traumatic memories arise in Mariam's mind "like clumps of water hyacinth caught in the eddies of murky waters" (Akhtar 3). As Faulkner says, "The past is never dead. It's not even past" (qtd. in Clapton 1). The stickiness of traumatic memories revolves around her bodily suppression and subjugation underpinned by politicization of the female body as a site for masculinized military power play. The compromise of her bodily agency and autonomy through rape is conspicuously palpable as she survives "with her body squeezed and pounded like meat in a mortar and pestle or with a life which is portioned out like the sacrificial flesh of the qurbani. After that moment, her body is never her own. She can never lay claim to her life again" (Akhtar 4). As "a victim of history" (5), her identity in the annals of national history is forged by the experience and memory of the war days and beyond. As Jan Assmann points out, the faculty of memory helps us "form an awareness of selfhood (identity), both on the personal and on the collective level. Identity, in its turn, is related to time" (109). Mariam's memories of the war and beyond and her presence in (or absence from) the collective memories of the nation are simultaneously crucial to her identity as well as the national identity of Bangladesh.

Nation-building in Bangladesh remains by and large a male project, and women only play a secondary role as sacrificing mothers, sexual victims, caregivers, and motivators. Women are at best viewed "as a national symbol ... the guardian of continuity and immutability of the nation, the embodiment of its respectability" (Mosse; qtd. in Ray 5). This is emblematic of the traditional equation of "the nation with the mother" (Nayar 105) as articulated in the term "motherland". Ahead of the war, Mariam went up to her boyfriend Abed Jahangir, who was a political activist and a future Freedom Fighter. He undermined her capacity as an individual who could fight alongside her male counterparts in the battleground, especially when she was pregnant with his child. Angry Abed fumed at Mariam: "Fight! You plan to fight? War is not a child's play. Instead of going to the

hospital, you've come here to join the war?"' (Akhtar 26). The mentality of a university graduate like Abed Jahangir signifies the core of the nationalist project as embedded in patriarchy and male chauvinism. In this context, Cynthia Enloe rightly considers nationalism as a "masculine construct" (qtd. in Nayar 106). Moreover, "Historically, the great wars have always been uber-focused on a very masculine narrative" (Naz et al. 87). Contrarily, women are considered as the "repository of tradition" (Sen 231), and "motherland or nation as women" must be "protected by brave citizen warriors" (Banerjee 12). The "brave citizen warriors" are almost exclusively men.

The Pakistani soldiers maltreated the captive women and girls as animals to be exploited as "the female body serve[s] as a site of patriarchal domination" (Mithun 136). The narrator conveys that some women, in apprehension of losing their chastity, used the sari to commit suicide in many Pakistani army camps and military stations, forcing the soldiers to disrobe them (Akhtar 82-83). The denuding of Bengali women is, however, tantamount to the denuding of the Bengali nation. The sense of shame attached to disrobing women of their saris and the loss of chastity is tangible. As D'Costa opines that systematic rape in times of violent conflicts and confrontations exposes an enemy community's inability to safeguard its women, hence "'feminizing' the enemy's land, which is also depicted as 'motherland'. Moreover, forced impregnation of an enemy's women during wartime is designed to disrupt the so-called purity of the enemy's national identity (23)." Such feminization and humiliation ripped the psyche of the Bengali nation asunder. In fact, the Pakistani military used rape as a systemic weapon to destroy the self-dignity of the Bengali people.

The national narrative of the Bengali nation with regards to the experience of the Biranganas is myopic, selective and marked by denial of details, mostly focusing on rape as the only tool of torture of the Biranganas. Mariam told Mukti, "It was not just that they made us wear rags or raped us, for me each kick of the boot, each prod of the bayonet, each cigarette burn was equally dreadful" (84). She dismissed the Bengali nation's monomaniacal obsession with regards to the Biranganas' experience as to how many times they were raped day and night. The nation ignores the other types of tortures as tortures, Mariam claimed (85). Simply put, there is a tendency within the mainstream Birangana discourse to downplay or ignore all sorts of inhuman torture suffered by the Biranganas apart from sexual ones. As memory is "always inherently shaped by collective contexts" (Erll 5), certain aspects of the Birangana travails are collectively ignored or forgotten. The post-Liberated Bengali nation, unfortunately, has not acknowledged the multiple dimensions to the infernal experience the Biranganas navigated through.

However, the Biranganas had to endure various aspects of trauma in different phases of their experience starting with their capture. As they tried to hide themselves or escape the army and their cohorts, they lived in utmost anxiety in anticipation of any fateful experience such as death and rape. As Krauss diagnoses the initial process of a traumatic event as a subject being "unfortunately absent—too distracted or decentered to defend him- or herself properly at the time of the attack. The life story of the traumatic subject is thus the account of a fundamental absence and lack of preparation" (32). By delving into Mariam's life gleaned through interviews, Mukti pieces together the harrowing details of her life following the capture. Mariam told Mukti, "I don't know what happened to me after that. I could not understand, could not feel a thing" (Akhtar 88). The sheer helplessness and loss of partial cognitive capacity to process reality is a mark of trauma that Mariam demonstrates. The inability of language as a mode of expression in the context of traumatic incidents cannot be overlooked. Mariam's inability to express her experience is part of her traumatization since for "history to be a history of trauma means that it is referential precisely to the extent that it is not fully perceived as it occurs" (Caruth 18). Her trouble

with articulation is a sign of trauma, which challenges "the capacities of narrative knowledge" (Luckhurst 79). While trauma is "anti-narrative" in its shock value, it also "generates the manic production of retrospective narratives that seek to explicate the trauma" (79). Indeed, the limit of language gets exposed when it comes to grappling with traumatic experiences, especially in the initial phase. That said, trauma could be articulated to an extent retrospectively.

Parading naked Bengali women in broad daylight is a Pakistani military tactic to inflict trauma upon captive women and render the Bengali nation effeminate as "women's bodies were perceived as the battle ground and as a tool to offend the enemy's masculinity and honor, which was also at stake" (De Felipe Urueña 21). The brutality of the event cannot remain unnoticed in *The Search*. As the Biranganas were paraded naked along busy streets, "Mariam hid her face with her hands. Clad only in underclothes, her body cringed in a corner of the truck like a beaten animal. It was not strangers that she feared, but people who she knew" (Akhtar 91). The cheering of the crowd around is a signal to what was to follow if they could somehow survive the war. The Biranganas are traumatized as they recollect such events since "social, semantic, political, and economic factors are present in the experience and recollection of trauma" (Balaev 7). The double-standard of the patriarchal Bengali society toward the victims of the Liberation War is conspicuous here.

A great cause of trauma for the Biranganas stems from the denial of their identity and existence by their families and friends. In post-War Bangladesh, families and relatives were–generally speaking–more concerned about their missing male relatives rather than female ones. Sensing that the missing girls and women might have fallen in the hands of the Pakistani servicemen or their loyalists and hence violated, they viewed them as disgrace to family/clan status. While in a hospital bed, Mariam felt deeply wounded since her parents refused to acknowledge her existence. She also denied her parents' existence and did not permit her case history to be recorded at the time of registration in the rehabilitation center. In fact, her parents denied "the existence of their child, but she was merely obscuring her past. Indeed, she can no longer live with that past identity" (Akhtar 113). While her parents were concerned about the life of their son Montu, a Freedom Fighter, they seemed to be indifferent to their daughter's whereabouts. For the Biranganas, the wartime "plight had been beyond measure" and that "amounted to trauma after the independence of the country, because as though they had committed sin. The sorrows of these women knew no bounds when their family members denied to accept them in fear of social stigma" (Islam 165). Such a double-standard proved devastating for many Biranganas, who had to carry the "spectral wound" (Mookherjee 26) of the war forever.

Similarly, the experience of the rape victims was worse in the post-Liberated Bangladesh. The narrator quotes a Birangana thinking that "wars end, this war will also end. But they would never be able to go back to their old identities, never regain their former addresses. Their place would be in the whorehouses of their own land and in foreign lands" (119). Anuradha, another Birangana, had a clear foresight. She told Mariam during their captivity that the countrymen would not welcome them after the war. She added that as the war ends, the men are celebrated as heroes while the women are viewed as fallen. She said: "they will turn us into whores" (136-37). Indeed, Anuradha and Shyamali ended up in prostitution. The Biranganas, who were sheltered by the post-Liberation War government under Prime Minister Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in different shelter/rehabilitation centers, became a matter of undue public attention. The narrator reports a young Birangana as asking whether they were zoo animals put on display for visitors to watch (140). Many Biranganas felt like exhibition items up for public consumption. Rehabilitation was a far cry for most of them. Many people offering to help them by shelter or through marriage did so

to get government rewards rather than out of altruistic motives. Since the stigma associated with rape was deeply ingrained in society, the Biranganas mainly tried to evade public attention. They "began to live in their newborn country under a shadow of shame" (Sharma and Ratnawat 33) and the *Birangana* title itself turned out to be "a double-edged sword for those wronged women" (Huq 198). Another critic comments that the stories of the Biranganas would have fallen into oblivion if books like *Talaash* had not been published. The nation's "collective amnesia towards this topic," she argues, needs to be discussed (Esha 23). Since memory is "central to individual and collective identity" (Eyerman 24), books like *The Search* play a pivotal role in keeping alive the memories of the Biranganas.

The treatment of the Biranganas by even many fellow male Freedom Fighters is deeply influenced by the latter's patriarchal worldview. Whereas the "unique display of emotion and risk-taking tendencies and unwillingness to compromise" (Dipa 41) manifested in Bengali masculinity in the course of the war is appreciable, the attitude of many men toward the rape survivors has not always been savory. As nationalism "typically sprung from masculinized memory, masculinized humiliation and masculinized hope" (Enloe 44), such negligence toward the Biranganas became possible. In an interview, Akhtar shares that her inspiration behind writing *Talaash* emanated from the Oral History Project of 71, which introduced her to some courageous women. She says, "Not only did they narrate the torture they went through in 1971, but also what they faced afterwards. Sometimes, that overshadowed the ghoulish experiences of war" (Akhtar). Indeed, post-War experience remains the bigger ordeal for the Biranganas in the patriarchal society of Bangladesh. The remembrance of those days of inexplicable torture traumatizes the Biranganas since rape "leaves huge and maybe irreversible scars, wounds and trauma" with the survivors "feeling their lives ruined" and rebuilding impossible (De Felipe Urueña 26). The narrator reveals that Mariam underwent severe panic while remembering her brutal treatment at the hand of Major Ishtiaque. She was thrown at the feet of the army officer, who had been drunk since evening. The soldier assigned to escort her raped her twice in the car and sodomized her once. He was about to rape her a third time when the car entered the venue (127). Memories of such ignominious days have a spectral presence in the Biranganas' lives. Remembering those excruciatingly painful days is itself traumatic. Mukti reports Birangana Baby reminiscing about those horrible times by singing a Bangla song: "'Remembrance is painful.' …[She] chirps like a bird, "My feelings are like caged birds so I have to hide them here (191)." As Aleida Assmann says, "The dynamics of individual memory consists in a perpetual interaction between remembering and forgetting" (97). The Biranganas like Baby are to oscillate between remembering and forgetting. They try to avoid painful memories but hardly succeed in the bid.

As a matter of fact, "A traumatic event, by definition, breaks down the accepted social and personal structures and belief systems of the individual" (Hunt 10). The commodification of Birangana Shyamali's body that had "become public property" (Akhtar 130) remains a constant source of her agonies. In this context, Mookherjee comments, "Trauma memory here is expressed as encoded not only in the body but also in social and everyday relations with objects and with the world around them" (125). The conditions of the Biranganas were unimaginable as Lentin finds that wars and conflicts are often rendered feminized through turning women "not only as sexual trophies exchangeable between male enemies, not only as markers of collective boundaries, but also as the symbolic representations of national and ethnic collectivities" (qtd. in Sen 6). Many of these dehumanized, ghostly-looking, exchangeable "sexual trophies" manifested signs of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) in addition to physical emaciation.

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) came into play immediately after the release of the Biranganas. Applying Herman's formulation of PTSD, Berk observes among the Biranganas of *The Search* "[t]he shock of being made only a powerless, unresponsive instrument of pleasure in the hands of the perpetrators continue even after [being] set free in the case of the rape victims" (202). She also notices in the behavior of Mariam and other Biranganas traits of robotization, trauma bonding, dissociation or doublethink, and loss of identity or changes in personality–which are secondary aspects of PTSD as outlined by Herman (202). For instance, as a matter of dissociation and loss of identity, Mariam "was (merely) obscuring her past. Indeed, she can no longer live with that past identity" (Akhtar 113). Critic Esha observes that she was "without a scope to express grief – it seems like she has little or no outlet for pain at times…. The concatenation of trauma never seems to end…(22)." Indeed, the Biranganas were "subaltern" beings having "metaphorical disability" and hence "treated as disabled or defective by their own society" (Oishe et al. 4). As pregnant Biranganas portrayed in Dilruba Z. Ara's *Blame* were denied access by their compatriots in independent Bangladesh, they realized they are "living in a society devoid of justice. Women are born here only to be blamed" (Biswas and Tripathi 55). Life was far worse for the justice-denied Biranganas in their liberated homeland.

However, many Biranganas embody resilience, women empowerment and self-respect against all odds. For instance, Mariam "stood up like a phoenix" and her "entire life is a testament to her bravery, serving as an inspiration to women across the nation and the globe" (Nitu and Ali 43). She searched for a job, married a man, opened a "Ma Meye Tailor Shop," sheltered another Birangana named Tuki. She fought till the end. Throughout the process, she had been betrayed by her friends, family, and fellow countrymen. She had to endure a series of insults, injustice, and maltreatment in the post-Liberated Bangladesh. Many Biranganas were resilient although they "have largely been looked upon as passive victims who unfortunately came under the wheel of history" (Sen 3). Unfortunately, though, none of the Biranganas as depicted in *The Search* could live a decent life in their independent country. Still, many of them displayed incredible courage, agency and determination.

The legacy of the Biranganas, therefore, should be duly acknowledged. The contention of the paper is that the Biranganas should not be forgotten, but celebrated for their rightful contribution to the Liberation efforts. In addition, the deafening silence around them should be broken and the political expediency with which they are used in national narratives should be rejected. This is because "...it is especially the accusation of remaining silent about the atrocities done to certain groups that can have a scandalizing effect and shatter hegemonic memory narratives" (Langenohl 171). The paper also acknowledges Shaheen Akhtar's *The Search* as one of those key fictional endeavors that document the Biranganas' "often unremembered contributions to the 1971 war, as well as the narratives of violence that are frequently shadowed, truncated, and stifled by engineered national histories" (Rakshit and Gaur 1-2). It also stresses the need for preservation of the memories of the Biranganas, ensuring their rightful place in history and guaranteeing human rights to war survivors. It concurs with Milan Kundera as he says, "The struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting" (1). It also advocates for better and more humane treatment of trauma victims and all other sufferers in society.

Conclusion

To conclude, the paper has analyzed the unfathomable sufferings of the Biranganas depicted in *The Search* in the light of Memory Studies, Trauma studies, and Feminism. It demonstrates how the Biranganas' ordeal multiplied in their free homeland as they are "a collective trauma-cum-taboo subject in post-war Bangladesh" (Huq 197). The amount of agonies, this study shows,

Mariam and fellow Biranganas have endured is outrageous and calls for rethinking about their experience and contribution. The paper also illustrates how patriarchal mindset is predominantly responsible for the ongoing sufferings of the Biranganas, who otherwise deserve humane treatment and due recognition. It also questions the silence around the Birangana issue and tries to draw attention of the relevant stakeholders to ensure the welfare of the Biranganas who are still alive and the proper acknowledgement of all Biranganas. This article demands that all forms of gender-based violence be stopped and a better world for all of humanity be built. Finally, it stresses that more research should be conducted on violence against women in armed conflict, especially with regards to the Bangladesh Liberation War in 1971.

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