The Female Body as a Site of Patriarchal Power Play: Contextualizing Tarfia Faizullah's *Seam*

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Abstract

The female body has been a gendered space upon which patriarchy plays out its power dynamics. The making, re-making, and unmaking of the female body has remained subject to the whims of men. In most cases, women are denied agency and freedom over their bodies. Men have exerted their power on the female body in the form of subjugation, repression, oppression, and exploitation. Hence, rape and all forms of sexual assault on women in the context of wars can be considered a patriarchal tool to assert the dominance of the attacking party and demoralize the community under attack. The victims of sexual attacks undergo psychological trauma during and after the war. In this context, Tarfia Faizullah's debut collection of poems *Seam* appears as a feminist investigation into the narrative of rape victims of the Bangladesh Liberation War. This book lends voice to the rape victims of the 1971 war whose bodies were politicized by the androcentric Pakistani army. Through a feminist lens, this qualitative paper will endeavor to explore how the female body served as a site of patriarchal domination in the Bangladesh Liberation War in the light of *Seam*.

Keywords: patriarchy, rape, violence, Birangona, feminism

Tarfia Faizullah's 2014 book *Seam* is a collection of poems penned after a series of interviews with Birangonas (Bangladesh War rape victims/survivors) the poet conducted as part of her fellowship requirements. The American poet of Bangladeshi origin recorded harrowing details of pangs and sufferings of the ill-fated women whose traumatic experiences are difficult to put into words. Yet, Faizullah took pains to articulate the nearly unspeakable events the Birangonas underwent at the hands of the marauding Pakistan army. The site of oppression has been female bodies where patriarchy of various types comes into play. The wartime rape and other sexual assaults are intricately related to androcentric power play. It purports to destroy female bodies as an expression of male chauvinism on the part of the masculinized military seeking to render feminized the community under attack. The binary opposition between masculinity and femininity

operates here, which privileges men over women. This binary is structurally related to a host of other binary oppositions, such as powerful/powerless, strong/weak, good/evil, right/wrong, superior/inferior, culture/nature, order/disorder, and state/resistance. As it follows, the masculinized Pakistan military sought to crush the popular resistance of the Bengali masses against the Pakistan state by feminizing the latter community in a demonstration of its (manly) power. Hence, bodies of Bengali women became the theater on which to exercise power by the Pakistani servicemen and their Bengali collaborators. A deeply rooted misogyny and androcentricity in South Asian societies motivated the Pakistan army in their genocidal rape campaign. Aspects of racism and androcentrism prevailed in the subjugation of Bengali women in the 1971 war. Using a feminist lens, this paper endeavors to shed light on how patriarchy operates on the bodies of women and reveal the ramifications of sexual assaults. It will also attempt to demonstrate that the Birangonas are doubly damaged, not simply by the immediate perpetrators but also by the host community, patriarchy being the common factor in both cases.

Rape as a Weapon of War

Rape comes across as a weapon of war in different discourses. The military uses it as a strategic tool to subdue the women – and hence, the whole community – by capitalizing on the psychological and social dimensions of the concept of sexual assault. Therefore, it is important to establish the definition of rape and how it appears as a strategic weapon in military conflicts. According to the UN, rape can be defined as the "insertion" of any apparatus, not limited to the penis, into any opening, not limited to the vagina, of the victim "under conditions of force, coercion, or duress" (qtd. in Farwell 392). As it occurs, rape is not constrained to vaginal penetration by the male genital. Under no circumstances, according to this broad definition, is the victim a willing accomplice in her own oppression. The role of power projection on the part of the perpetrator(s) is manifest here. In the same vein, wartime rape is defined by the UN Commission on Human Rights as "a deliberate and strategic decision on the part of combatants to intimidate and destroy 'the enemy' as a whole by raping and enslaving women who are identified as members of the opposition group" (qtd. in Farwell 392). According to Ruth Seifert, rape can happen during and after wars because of the following reasons:

- As part of the ritualized and regulated "games" of wars, rape reflects the exercise of sexual and gender-specific violence;
- The abuse of women during military conflicts is an element of communication between men of two opposing communities, and the graphic expression of triumph over men who failed to protect "their" women;

- Wartime rape is justified by acceptance of the notion that within a military masculine culture, following "rites of passage" soldiers acquire a certain kind of eroticized masculine identity that sanctions "natural" aggression towards women;
- As tactical objectives in "dirty wars," women are systematically targeted with the intent to destroy the adversary's cultural identities; and
- Feelings of hostility and hatred towards women are deeply ingrained in cultures, which are acted out as orgies of rape during extreme conditions.

(qtd. in D'Costa 5)

The rape of Bengali women and girls in the Bangladesh Liberation War must be seen in light of the reasons mentioned above. Applying feminist insights as far as gendered violence embedded in the deeply patriarchalized Pakistani military campaign is concerned, let us explore the brutalization of Bengali girls and women as captured in *Seam* by Tarfia Faizullah.

Female Body as a Site of Control

Patriarchy is predicated upon quite a few control mechanisms, not least the one over female bodies. Male superiority can be asserted via stamping an authority over the women and girls, thereby denying them the agency, subjecthood, and right to their bodies. Rape, especially, during military conflicts becomes a viable option for the military – which is almost exclusively manned by men – as a matter of feeding its "male ego." The "male ego" is nourished by violent self-assertions, musclemanship, and the domination of the feminine "Other." The female members of the enemy community and, by extension, the whole community, need to be feminized (i.e., subdued, controlled, let down, brutalized, oppressed, etc.) by way of sexual assaults to enable the military to express its "maleness." So, the bodies of women become a ground upon which the male ego of the invading military satisfies itself. Card elaborates:

> It [rape] breaks the spirit, humiliates, tames, produces a docile, deferential, obedient soul. Its immediate message to women and girls is that we will have in our own bodies only the control that we are granted by men and thereby in general only that control in our environments that we are granted by men. (6)

This will to control women's bodies and enjoy superiority and psychological edge guides the "male gaze" of the military men, which finds graphic expression in the following stanza:

> – 1971
> And a Bangladeshi
> Woman catches the gaze

Of a Pakistani
Soldier through rain-curved palm
Trees—her sari is torn
From her— (Faizullah 8)

The "male gaze" here is one of intimidation, and the tearing of the sari an action of controlling and subduing the female victim as she is left without a choice but to surrender unwillingly. This heinous act has left the victim voiceless and her body out of her control. As the speaker says,

The torn woman curls
into green silence
.....
the torn woman a helix of blood. (Faizullah 8, italics original)

The victim's subjecthood is compromised, and she finds herself powerless as rape "is the attempt on the part of one subject (the assailant) to overwhelm the subjectivity of the other (the victim) in a particularly sexualized way" (Cahill 25). Here, the Pakistani military man imposes his (male) subjectivity on his Bengali female victim to articulate his superior subject-position.

Similarly, Pakistan army men violated many underaged female subjects whose own sense of subjectivity was yet to be formed. Many victims did not come of age at the moment of their violation. Their recognition of their own sexuality happened in the most unfortunate of circumstances. The brutality and barbarity of rape definitely had damaged their "sense of self" before it came into being. Their coming to terms with their female identity is underscored by a sense of helplessness and victimhood, the scars of which they would have to carry for a lifetime. The speaker lets us know:

Once, she will say, *I didn't*
know there was a hollow inside

me until he pushed himself
into it. (Faizullah 23)

It is evident from the above instance that the experience of rape "is sexual but is not sex itself" (Cahill 140). Therefore, the enforced sexual intercourse strips the underaged victim of her bodily integrity and reinforces her lack of agency and freedom. Again, the intention to control the female body is part of the broader scheme to control the Bengali community. Thus, the female body has been politicized, and misogyny informs and enables such politicization.

Female Body Racialized: Race Feminized

In the context of armed conflicts, sexual oppression of women often assumes racial dimensions. The female members of the enemy community embody the core essence of that community, thus making them a strategic target to attack. The code of honor in a patriarchal society is tied to sexual purity of its female members. The violation of that honor code in the form of sexual assaults, i.e., rape, is tantamount to an attack on the dignity of the whole society. Stigma attached to rape and other forms of sexual violence makes the community, as a whole, vulnerable as if it were emasculated. The attacking army men seek to exact revenge upon the enemies by defiling the bodies of their female members. D'Costa goes on to explain the patriarchal rationale behind the wartime rape campaign in the following words:

> In its symbolic female identity, the nation is often perceived as being threatened by invaders. Further, the feminine construction of the nation also deploys the symbolic identity of womanhood, a view that proves useful to explaining the ideology of rape and forced impregnation during conflict. Systematic rape during violent conflict demonstrates an enemy community's failure to protect its women, thereby '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)

In addition, racial overtones and undertones characterize such sexual aggressions. One of the bones of contention between the Pakistani state and the Bengali nation is the language question. The Pakistani authorities sought to eliminate the Bangla language, spoken by the Bengali community of East Pakistan/Bengal. The wartime sexual violence against Bengali women is an attack upon Bangla. In her correspondence with her grandmother, the speaker says:

> *Bangla: language I speak*
> *Now to your grieving daughter, this language*
>
> *The bodies of women were once broken*
> *Open for.* (Faizullah 19)

The bodies of women were "broken open" as part of the ethnic cleansing of the Bengalis, thus politicizing the female body as a weapon of war. Not only that, inferiorization of Bengalis was made possible by enslaving Bengali women and equating them with lesser animals. As a Birangona reveals:

> That evening,
> A blade sliced through string, through

> Skin, red on red on red. *Kutta*, the man
> In khaki says. It is only later I realize
> it is me he is calling *dog*. *Dog. Dog.* (Faizullah 25)

The dog analogy by the rapist Pakistani soldier going about his criminal business with his "blade" (male genital) is reflective of the (West) Pakistanis' racial attitude to the Bengalis in general, whom they look down upon as a lesser people. What is more, such racial hatred comes into play during the sexual repression of Bengali women's bodies. That the bodies are cut terribly with "blades" metaphorically reveals the brutal bleeding of the nation at large, which can be termed as "The Rape of Bangladesh" in Anthony Mascarenhas' words. Thus, the female/sexual and the national/political are intertwined through a "body" trope. This is because,

> Rape, as with all terror-warfare, is not exclusively an attack on the body – it is an attack on the "body-politic." Its goal is not to maim or kill one person but to control an entire socio-political process by crippling it. It is an attack directed equally against personal identity and cultural integrity. (Nordstrom, qtd. in Bouta et al. 35)

There is no doubt that the brutalization of female bodies, rooted in misogyny, in the Bangladesh Liberation War, is political. The Pakistani authorities considered Bengali Muslims as lesser Muslims and were intent on destroying their Bengali identity. The Bengalis were on the wrong side of the identity politics within the Pakistani state. The genocidal campaign particularly targeted Bengali women as women are potential mothers of the future generations of enemies. Again, the Pakistan army intended to change the genetic feature of the Bengalis by impregnating their women with babies of (West) Pakistani stock. That is why Bengali Muslim (as well as other) women turned into a matter of "torture porn" in the hands of barbaric military men. Faizullah sheds light on this thus:

> *Are you*
> *Muslim or Bengali*, they
> Asked again and again.
> *Both*, I said, *both*—then
> rocks were broken along
> my spine, my hair a black
> fist in their hands, pulled
> down into the river again
> and again. Each day, each
> night: river, rock, fist— (Faizullah 28)

The modes of torture are varied and underpinned by sadism. Bengali women were dehumanized in the Pakistani torture cells and morphed into mere objects.

Quoting Liz Kelly, Meger argues that "men affirm one another as men through exclusion, humiliation, and objectification of women" (105). The self-affirmation of the men in uniform enabled through consumption of female bodies leads to a gross violation of human rights.

As already indicated, the Pakistan Army's biopolitical assault upon Bengali women's bodies is an enactment of racial hatred. The violating Pakistani soldiers employed racial diatribes against Bengalis as belonging to a lesser stock. The speaker informs:

> I turn
> my face away. *Kutta*, he says. *You smell*. Tell me what
> you know about the body, and I will you how
> it must turn against itself. *Now I've seen a savage*
> *girl naked*, he says. How my body became an eddy,
> a blackblue swirl. *Don't cry*, he says. (Faizullah 34)

By calling the Bengali rape victim as a smelly "Kutta" (dog/bitch) and "savage" and asking her not to "cry" but take things easy, the Pakistani soldier reinforced his racial superiority. On the other hand, the body of the victim "turn[ed] against itself" and became a turbulent "eddy, a blackblue swirl". That the victim lost autonomy over her own body is precisely what the racially inflected rape is all about since "[s]exual violence can result from a misogynist attitude prevalent in a culture" (Kalra and Bhugra 246). Put simply, the Birangonas are victims to a deep misogyny in the Pakistani military establishment.

Sexual Violence on Female Body: Expression of Misogyny

Whether it occurs during peacetime or wartime, sexual violence of all forms has its roots deeply entrenched in socio-political structure. Patriarchy as a system of male superiority thrives on exerting absolute control over women, and sexual attack is a violent expression of that superiority complex. The Pakistani servicemen employed all kinds of scare tactics on Bengali women as a brutal manifestation of their masculinity. As it follows, the "female body" appeared as a viable medium through which the androcentric orientation of the Pakistan armed forces articulated itself. They strategized their war plan, at least partly, around the female body as, Brownmiller contends that:

> rape is not a crime of irrational, impulsive, uncontrollable lust, but is a deliberate, hostile, violent act of degradation and possession on the part of a would-be conqueror, designed to intimidate and inspire fear. (391)

This intention to "intimidate and inspire fear" among the Bengali civilians spurred the Pakistani servicemen on to commit rape and other forms of sexual

violence in the most heinous of ways. The speaker in a Faizullah poem reveals:

> [A] rope steady around my throat
> As they pushed me toward the dark
> room, the silence clotted thick
> with a rotten smell, dense like pear
> blossoms, long strands of jute
> braided fast around our wrists.
> Yes, there were others there. (Faizullah 26)

The inhuman treatment of women, all tied with jute ropes like animals, huddled together in a dark, damp, odorous, and suffocating room is motivated by the mantra of "social control." The women had no agency over their bodies, which were amenable to manipulation in the hands of the Pakistani army. In order to the keep the morale of the masculinized army high, they launched themselves upon the women's physique as rape, by nature, is an exercise of "male domination and female degradation" (McPhail 316). The key intention behind the diabolical rape campaign is, by and large, to reinforce the male ego of the Pakistani servicemen at the expense of Bengali women.

Mutilation of the Female Body: Patriarchal Barbarity

Misogynistic practice is not limited to outright sexual violence against female subjects. There are other types of bodily disfigurement, mutilation, and injuries that can traumatize women. In addition, psychological trauma involving an anticipation of rape or other physical harm can manifest itself in bodily reactions such as nervousness. Faizullah brings to the fore the scene of a horrific beheading of a Bengali woman in the following lines:

> I didn't know my body's
> worth until they came for it. I held
> her as she shook at night: pond water
> scored by storm. She held me
> as I shook at dawn. Don't you know
> they made us watch her head fall
> from the rusted blade of the old
> jute machine? That they made us
> made us made us made us made us? (Faizullah 30-31)

They (the Pakistan military men) came for the "body" of the speaker and thus she realized her "body's worth." This is ironic as the female body here is worthy only as a tool of patriarchal manipulation. The gendered body of Bengali women not only served as a pleasure-seeking site but also as a battleground for Pakistani servicemen on which to demonstrate their military supremacy through utter

barbarity. The mutilation of a female victim by beheading her with "a rusted blade of an old jute machine" is intended to show the brute force of the "manly" servicemen and coerce the victims into helpless submission. Faizullah gives us a glimpse into how causing bodily damage is a male chauvinistic practice:

> All I knew was underground: bodies piled on bodies,
> low moans, sweat, rot seeking out scratches on our thighs,
> the makeshift tattoos he carved on our backs to mark us. (34)

The stacking of bodies upon bodies, allowing infections to spread and scars to form across the bodies, and the carving of tattoos on bodies to mark them are instances of mutilation of the bodily integrity of Bengali women. Taking liberty with the female body and denying women the basic right to their own body is an essential component of the structural foundation of patriarchy, which is intent on dominating women any which way it can as Grace maintains that "sexual violence can be understood as a symptom of a deeper violence in the very constitution of the gendered subject" (36). Hence, the plight of Bengali women in the course of the Liberation War is tied to something more profound than it seems to be.

The bodily dismemberment and disfigurement of women as a mechanism of dominance is underscored by sheer sadism and barbarity. Often, militaries justify wartime consumption of female bodies "with a discourse that claims that men (hardworking soldiers!) need sex and that women are commodities that can (and should) be used" (Boesten 120). Dehumanization and colonization of female bodies in terms of mutilation and consumption to gratify carnal desires, derive visual pleasure, and feed the male ego of the army men is a proof of the heinousness that characterizes the patriarchal institution that is the military.

Starvation as Weapon against the Female Body

Pakistani army men employed starvation against Bengali women as a "biopolitical" weapon. Starvation can affect the human body and mind badly, and it may serve as an avenue through which captives of war can be manipulated, coerced, and objectified. By using food insecurity, many Pakistani servicemen, sadistically enough, pitted Bengali "comfort women" against each other to vie for their attention. The speaker, in the following lines, spotlights food insecurity as an effective control mechanism:

> Over milk tea and butter biscuits, the commander asks
> what it feels like to have dirty blood running through our
> veins. (Faizullah 34)

The Pakistani commander enjoys delicious food and tantalizes the female victims

while slighting them racially with the words "dirty blood." The "dirty blood" symbolizes racial impurity and inferiority, which the Pakistani authorities (as well as civilians) associated with the Bengalis. This impurity is reinforced through mass rape of Bengali women, who were now polluted and dirtied. At a broader level, the effeminized Bengalis were now polluted through sexual violence in the hands of the masculinized Pakistanis. The patriarchal nature of the aggression is hardly concealed. Furthermore, food insecurity is used here as a strategic ploy to punish the bodies of women. Punishing the body through hunger and tantalizing them with a show of mouth-watering snacks, the Pakistani commander here tries to establish his dominance over Bengali women. To satisfy hunger, a basic need of the body, Bengali women would compete with each other to win the favor of the Pakistani service men. As a Birangona confesses:

> There were days we wooed him, betrayed each other
> for his attention
> ……..
> when the time
> came for his choosing, we all gave in for tea, a mango
> overripe. (Faizullah 34)

This confession on the part of a Birangona reveals how the female body has been (ab)used through starvation, tantalization, and sexualization under a deeply inhuman military campaign.

Denial of Subjecthood: Postwar Crises for Birangonas

Despite a measure of state recognition, life for Birangonas in postwar Bangladesh is one of enormous suffering. Stigma and humiliation attached to rape – bodily disintegrity – made it difficult for the Birangonas to get rehabilitated in mainstream society. Except for a fortunate few, most Birangonas were rejected by their own families and communities. The postwar government under Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman recognized the sacrifices of the Birangonas as evident in the following lines:

> the new
> president had wrapped me in our new
> flag: a red sun rising
> across a green field. *You*
> *saved our country*, he said. (Faizullah 49-50)

However, society at large did not welcome the rape survivors of the war. Bengali society is patriarchal, and raped women are considered to be a disgrace to the family and community. Patriarchy, by nature, places high value on the chastity/purity, sexual loyalty, and bodily integrity of women. Any anomaly, be it forced

or deliberate, on the part of women is condemned severely. This patriarchal spirit motivates victim-blaming and victim-shaming. One of the Birangonas interviewed by Faizullah shares her story of postwar rejection thus:

> I stood in the dark
> doorway. Twilight. My grandfather's
> handprint raw across my face. *Byadob*,
> he called me: trouble-
> maker. How could you let them
> touch you? he asked,
> .....
> Leave. Don't come
> back, he said. (Faizullah 49)

The grandfather, who was so affectionate to his granddaughter is now dismissive of her. He even goes on to call her "Byadob" (ill-mannered and a trouble-maker in Bengali) and holds her responsible for her own miseries. It is as if she "allowed" the perpetrator(s) to "touch" her. Again, the metonymy of "touch" underscores the physicality of rape. There is a delusion/prejudice embedded in much of the patriarchal thought process that victims in fact ask to be raped. It is as though there was an element of willingness on the part of women to allow themselves to be sexually violated. This "false consciousness" leads to victim blaming/shaming, and many Birangonas were further victimized as accomplices in their own bodies' violation.

Male insecurities regarding sexual impurity of women motivated the patriarchal Bengali society to ostracize, repulse, marginalize, and reject the Birangonas. These men carry the memory of their emasculation at the hands of the Pakistanis. Despite official glorification, every Birangona turned from "somebody" to "nobody" due to their "body" being violated. Even the official conferral of the designation "Birangona" has its ironic effect as it, generally speaking,

> could not bring acceptance of the victimized women in the society. On the contrary the title Birangana … became synonymous [with] 'Barangona' which means prostitute in Bangla, and instead of a mark of honour it became a mark of shame for these women. (Gautam 264)

The term "Birangona," according to Faustina Pereira, comes with restrictive privileges and many of the rape victims refused to take advantage of the designation as doing so "would be tantamount to focusing on the scar of rape on the victim, thus forcing to risk a social death" (Pereira 62; qtd in D'Costa 13). So, it is beyond doubt that, despite their recognition by the state, almost all Birangonas carry the scars of their wartime ordeals in a patriarchal community.

They are denied their agency and subject, as du Toit considers rape as "an attack on the very conditions of being a self and a subject in the world" (6). It is evident that "rape does not turn women into things: it forcibly reduces their sexual being to that of another, thereby eclipsing their ontological distinctiveness" (Cahill 28). People attribute all sorts of negative adjectives to the rape victim. They are no longer addressed with affectionate terms. They become pariahs and are bombarded with pejoratives. The following stanza sheds light on the fall in favor of these girls and women following their sexual assault:

> *bhalo-me, karap-me*
> *chotto-shundori —*
> badgirl, goodgirl,
> littlebeauty—in Bangla
> There are words
> for every kind of woman
> but a raped one. (Faizullah 29)

Postwar hardships redouble for rape victims who give birth to war babies. They are confronted with difficult choices with regards to their own position in society and the future of their unwanted children. It is not unlikely that they would like to discard the babies as they bear testament to their wartime misfortunes. In addition, the babies carry the DNA as well as the memory of the perpetrators. It is possible that the mothers feel a sense of revenge and revulsion towards their own babies begotten by the brutal military men. The dilemma is motherhood intervenes in such delicate situations. The babies are theirs and not theirs at the same time. The following stanza encapsulates the dilemma, thus:

> I did not want his
> or his or his child inside me,
> outside me, beside me. Never
> will she know that I cupped her
> head and began to press hard, but
> stopped. (Faizullah 39-40)

Usually, motherhood wins over all other considerations. But, such decisions – whether to keep the babies or not – involve an immense amount of psychological drama. In other words, the wartime trauma persists beyond the war and hardly dissipates. While the "Birangonas" are glorified in textbooks, artworks, memorials, museums, etc., there remains a deafening silence about them. People hardly go into detail while talking about them. Usually, they avoid such topics altogether. Despite public commemoration, which is more ceremonial than not, the "Birangonas" are almost a deliberately avoided or forgotten entity.

When a little baby girl visits a museum along with their parents and looks at the portraits depicting the assault on women, she gets curious. But her parents remain awkwardly silent in response to her inquisitive questions:

> the portrait of a raped woman trapped
> in a frame, face hidden behind her own black
> river of hair.
> .....
> She asks, Did someone hurt her?
> Did she do something bad? Her mother
> Does not reply. Her father turns, shudders,
> as the light drinks our silences …. (Faizullah 54)

The sense of discomfort and embarrassment of the parents is indicative and redolent of our collective attitude towards the "Birangonas". This silence is no less than criminal as the Birangonas suffer all along in silence as they are silenced. As Nayanika Mookherjee puts it, "Worldwide, the dominant understanding is that communities and nations consign sexual violence during conflict to oblivion and silence. It is understood to be a cost of war" (7). Although she contends that public conversation about Birangonas takes place in Bangladesh, how far it contributes to an intimate and authentic understanding and proper documentation of their experiences and memories is a matter of debate. Tarfia Fiazullah's *Seam* is, therefore, a commendable attempt at breaking the relative silence by recording the experiences of the Birangonas and by questioning our unacceptable collective silence and selective vocality.

Conclusion

Tarfia Faizullah's *Seam* seamlessly weaves the fragmented stories of fragmented women who are doubly damaged – once during the Liberation War and then after it. In both time periods and instances, patriarchy in different forms transmute Birangonas into, paradoxically enough, glorified beings in history books, literature, and public commemoration but shamed into (near) silence or oblivion in society. They are silent as "Devalued survivors excluded from the moral universe of the new regime of truth and justice cannot find [a] voice to reconcile and heal" (Saikia 7). They also suffer irremediably as "The injury cannot be healed, it extends through time" (Levi 24; qtd in Saikia 19) for them. However, some of the untold stories of these almost muted but endlessly suffering women burst at the seams in *Seam* redirecting our attention to the collective hostage we are held to patriarchy that runs deep in South Asian societies, not least in our Bangladeshi/Bengali society. Thus, the book unsettles and disrupts the collective amnesia and awkward silence around the "Birangonas," who deserve due state recognition, social-cultural acceptance, welcoming treatment,

and radical empathy. Further research should be conducted to ensure the untold stories of the Birangonas come out, the collective criminal silence is questioned, and the community leaves its patriarchal prejudices and bias.

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