Women's Experiences and Memories of War in Birendra Kumar Bhattacharyya's *Love in the Times of Insurgency* and Sorraya Khan's *Noor*

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This paper is an attempt at exploring the memories of women survivors of war by reading two texts -Birendra Kumar Bhattacharyya's *Love in the Time of Insurgency*, which has at its backdrop the World War II and the undercurrent of the insurgent movement of the Nagas of North East India, and Sorraya Khan's *Noor*, which again, is a novel which deals with the war leading to the partition of East and West Pakistan. Central to this paper is the effort to broaden the understanding of conflict and war by looking beyond the objective historiography of war and to emphasize on the 'human consequences of war', by dealing particularly with the experiences of women during times of conflict. It is an attempt to study via literature how personal memories present the unique nature of violence on women during wars. It also addresses the question of forgetting, silence and trauma that come simultaneously with memory, which makes it difficult to recover the survivor's memory as wholeness or homogeneity. The paper also explores how fiction can go a long way in healing pain by bringing up uncomfortable facts for consideration and thus deconstructing the dominant discourse. Attention is also paid to the representation of struggles for reconciliation, redress, healing and forgiveness in the select texts. It finally highlights the role played by women in pushing for resolution of conflicts and moving the country towards a situation of peace.

World War II (1939-1945), a monumental event in the history of the world was not without its effects on the Nagas of the then Naga Hills in the Northeast Frontier of British India. The Nagas, who mostly supported the British at that time, had to be a part of what is called the "Battle of Kohima", a battle that was fought as a part of Burma campaign, a result of the conflict between the British and Japanese forces. It was a struggle between the two forces to retain their hold over Kohima, the present capital of Nagaland, because as Khrienuo

puts it, "to the Japanese, the siege of Kohima was essential to secure their conquest in Southeast Asia; while to the British the defence was vital from the point of defending the whole of the Indian sub-continent" (57). Finally, the Japanese faced defeat at the hands of the British. During the war, the Nagas were subjected to a lot of sufferings and hardships at the hands of both the British and the Japanese. Naga villages were raided, houses and paddy fields burnt, bomb shells dropped, people killed by British guns, and livestock destroyed and consumed by the retreating Japanese soldiers (File no.497, 1944: Naga State Archive). Also, "isolated cases of barbarism which seem to be inseperable from the Japanese Army took place. There were even cases of rape, murder and maltreatment" (File no.497, 1944: Naga State Archive). The war also marked the beginning of the Naga insurgent movement when a handful of Nagas decided to establish a distinct Naga identity and demanded a separate Naga nation-state from the Indian government, in another words, a partition of India into Nagaland and India. It is against this background, that the story of *Yaruingam* (translated as *Love in the Time of Insurgency*) is set.

On the other hand, the partition of Pakistan into West and East Pakistan (Bangladesh), which is the background for Sorayya Khan's novel, *Noor*, took place mainly on linguistic and religious grounds. It was a general belief on the part of people of West Pakistan that the Bengali Muslims of East Pakistan could not live up to their religion because they have more Indian influences. The strategy applied to bring the Muslims of East Pakistan at par with themselves was to make Urdu the national language. But, the decision faced severe oppositions of the Bengalis as only 1% of the population spoke Urdu in Bangladesh. This ultimately led to the liberation War of 1971 which is considered the third most devastating incident of the twentieth century after the famine of 1943/4 and the Partition of 1947. At Pakistani dictator Yahya Khan's orders, the Pakistani troops targeted the Bengali institutes, peoples and organizations. Minority groups like women, children, Hindus and other ethnic groups were among the victims of war.

Surprisingly, in most historiographical accounts of war, dates and numbers are given importance over accounts of large-scale violence which took million's of people's lives and gendered violence meted out on women. The experiences of violence by women either remain unsaid or unexplored in nationalist historiography as it tends to separate the idea of 'war/partition' from 'violence'. As Gyanendra Pandey would have it, there is a wide chasm between the historian's apprehension of war/partition and what we may call a more popular, survivor's account of it - between history and memory.

Memory plays an important role in claiming the truth about gendered violence on women during partition/wars. Yet the whole process of 'memory' is complicated as memory is constantly invented and obliterated in the process of narrating partition/war. The politics of

memory has been manipulated by nationalist historians in order to reinforce the essence of national identity - the homogeneous and totalized image of a nation and thus as Gyanendra Pandey says (in the context of the Partition of 1947), the historian's history of' "Partition" is not a history of the lives and experiences of the people who lived through the time, of the way in which the events of the 1940's were constructed in the minds, of the identities and uncertainties that partition created or reinforced' (194). In the attempt to imagine a more homogenising nation and nationalism, the nationalist historians disallow some of the memories of violence, especially on women, from entering the discourse. To this end, the dominant state discourse has even denied the experiences and memories of the victims. Only those moments of the history of partition are remembered which helps in bringing national cohesion.

However, a woman survivor's memory of war and partition shifts from the discourse of nationalism to that of the experience of suffering. Their narratives foreground their physical, emotional and psychological sufferings during partition. The moment of independence and freedom is remembered by the women survivors only in terms of their sufferings in the shape of rape, mutilation, abduction but also as witness to other women's bodily sufferings and killings. "Abduction", "prostitution" and "rape" are common tropes in the narratives of women survivors of war. Rape, torture, deliberate impregnation, premeditated infection of sexually transmitted diseases, foetuses ripped from wombs, sexual enslavement, forced prostitution, etc bespeak of the sexual aggression unleashed in men by war. In *Noor*, Sorayya Khan presents a brutal display of the female body through the image of a prostitute. Ali, a soldier from Pakistan in the Bangladesh War of Independence was given the task of fetching girls for his senior officer. One unique characteristic of violence on women during the Bangladesh War of Independence was this that unlike the violence during the partition of India and Pakistan where both sides perpetrated violence on each other's womenfolk, in Bangladesh, the Pakistani troops got the sole freedom to inflict violence on the women of Bangladesh. While the Bangladeshi womenfolk were raped and tortured by the Pakistani soldiers, the Bangladeshi men folk in turn raped minorities like Biharis who had migrated to the delta after 1947, on the pretext that they were Pakistani collaborators, who supported the Pakistani armed forces. Susan Brownmiller theorizes that rape is primarily about power and not about sexuality because "rape is not inspired by sexual stimuli, but by political motivations to dominate and degrade ... [it is] a deliberate, hostile, violent act of degradation and possession on the part of a would-be conqueror, designed to intimidate and inspire fear" (439). In *Noor*, Ali recalls the brutality with which the woman, who was also a young mother, whom he fetched for his senior officer was forced to succumb to the desires of the military officer:

> The officer brought his face close to her belly. He untucked her sari with his mouth and the cloth fell to the ground. Underneath, she was naked. The officer pushed his

face into her belly. To keep her balance, she took a step backwards. When he took his face from her skin, he left behind two rows of teeth marks. She didn't make a sound.

White dripped from her breast onto her stomach. Milk is white, cloudy, from the breast. That's when it occurred to me. The milk, the marks on her belly, The woman was a young mother (139).

During times of war women become extremely vulnerable to assaults on their bodies and the bodies almost turn into battle fields. Exploiting the women of the enemy party is gratifying not only to the man's own personal desires but it also symbolizes the victory of one's nation over the other. Gendered violence during wars mainly emerges from patriarchal power relations and nationalist discourse. The patriarchal values of the subcontinent deem purity and chastity important in a woman. Women are seen as the repository of tradition and therefore inviolable. But, the body that is capable of chastity and purity becomes equally capable of pollution and become sites for production of power. Kamala Visweswaran says, "A woman's modesty signifies the masculinity of her community. She becomes the symbol of violence as the shame and subjection of her community is represented in her" (68). In *No or*, the officer after forcing himself on the weak and helpless woman shouted, "Jivai Pakistan. Long live Pakistan" (140) which brings us closer to the fact that men reaffirmed their masculinity during times of upheaval through the female self-sacrifice of her body to the lust of men. Again, in *Love in the Time of Insurgency*, Birendra Bhattacharya tries to remember the plight of Naga women during World War II through his depiction of women characters in the novel. He highlights the plight of a Naga woman named Sharengla who was abducted by a Japanese soldier, seduced to live with him without marrying her, and at the time of his departure from the place, Sharengla was even pregnant with his child. During wars, when most soldiers had to spend long periods of time in foreign lands, it was not unusual for them to land in love affairs with native woman, exploit their body to quench their physical needs and use their services for food and shelter. Forced impregnation is an insidious aspect of gender-based violence, furthering the idea of domination of one group over another. Sharengla can easily be counted as one of those women who were physically and emotionally exploited during war. It is evident from the story that Ishewara, the soldier had promised her to spend his whole life with her and marry her immediately after the war. The novel begins at the point when the war is already over and the Japanese soldiers after their long stay at Nagaland are retreating. Sharengla tries to stop Ishewara from going away, reminding him of his promise, the risk she had taken to live-in with him without getting married, and his baby that she is pregnant with. But Ishewara keeps telling her that the war did not end in the way he had expected it to end, that he is worried about his safety, and that he will come back for her

some day. There is no attempt on his part to stay back which puts the very idea that he could have been in love with Sharengla under suspect. Thus, Sharengla is made to feel nothing less than a prostitute by Ishewara. In a situation of war, where the Nagas joined hands with the British and turned hostile to the Japanese invaders and the Indians, Sharengla mourned for her deception in love. In Sorayya Khan's *Noor*, too, Khan projects a case of abduction during war. A veteran of the 1971 conflict between East and West Pakistan, named Ali, returns to West Pakistan from the war carrying a five or six year old child, Sajida. He believed that he had helped the small Bengali child by bringing her home with him, but later he realises that he had actually abducted her. Khan writes,

> At the time, he'd believed his intention was to help the child. But as the years passes and he'd had more and more time to consider his actions, he knew he'd done it, not for her, but for himself. In the shape of the child crouched over a curb in downtown Dhaka, Ali imagined making amends, atoning (172).

Ali never disclosed how he had found his daughter, Sajida and maintained his authority by feeding Sajida's curiosity about her identity only with the words, "[I] saw you. [I] found you. [I] took you"(172). Ali never got married and his fear of losing Sajida made him build a "barricaded house" in Islamabad where he lived with his mother (Nanijaan) and Sajida who untraditionally remained in her father's house even after marriage, with her husband Hussein and three children. Sajida's faint memories about her childhood at Bangladesh always made her feel that the truth was not what her father had told her.

Surprisingly, women who were abducted and later recovered are not received back in the family and society with respect. They are considered impure having been polluted by the 'other' man, and therefore considered outsiders. Sharengla, in *Love in the Time of Insurgency*, because of her abduction is considered a fallen woman and is ostracized from the village. Even Rishang, who once loved Sharangla and someone who is considered wiser than the rest of the people in the village, showed hesitation in caring for Sharengla. He says,

> But she is no longer a virgin, a voice inside him said. She does not deserve these roses. They were meant for a virgin who was to be my wife. Sharangla will not be accepted by my society, she is no more than a concubine, ravished by another man (19).

It was even worse when women had children with the 'other' man. The humiliation women experience from the rape itself as well as the birth of a child from the enemy distorts the idea of motherhood as a symbolic marker of ethnicity and national identity. Sharengla is looked down by society for her unwed motherhood from a stranger. She is no longer considered eligible for marrying a bachelor but only fit to be the other wife of older men in a society which supports polygamy. Ngathingkhui, a man who is of the age of Sharengla's

father proposes marriage to her stating that since his earlier wife is unable to provide him with an heir, he is ready to accept Sharengla's yet to be born child. In this manner, women became prey not only to the men of another community but also their own, to their social bias that they are subjected to. Thus, the women survivor's narratives which highlight this aspect of wars break the illusion of 'the unitary memory-nation' (Olick12).

But memory is fragmentary and therefore does not stand as a strong ground on the basis of which we can claim new histories. Karen Fields notes that the 'faultless reconstruction of memory' is impossible because of being disturbed by an 'individual's wishes, a group's suggestions, a moment's connotations, an environment's clues, an emotion's demands, a self's evolution, a mind's manufacture of order' (89). Sometimes memories of the experience can be banished from the women's consciousness, in a form of amnesia, or banished by the community in a form of repressed memory. This not only creates a 'memory gap', as Lentin (1999) describes it for the women themselves, it hides their experiences from history. The memories of the survivors reveal ruptures, contradictions and sometimes they remain silent about their experiences. Researchers like Kamala Bhasin, Ritu Menon and Urvashi Butalia (Bhasin, 1998; Memon, 1998; Butalia, 1998) acknowledge that the witnesses and victims of partition violence no longer wished to speak about the troubled time having either forgotten, forgiven, worked through or moved on from the past. The simultaneity of memory and forgetting makes it impossible to recover the survivor's memory as a homogeneous whole. In *Noor*, the memory of the events comes back to Sajida and Ali only in fragments. Sajida from the very beginning acknowledges that "her past, unclear and unspoken, forever lingered just beyond her touch ..." (3). Sajida had only fleeting memories of her mother which came to haunt her every now and then, so much so that she sometimes felt that her mother was still a part of her life. When her husband asked her how she knew so much sewing, she carelessly replies,"Ma is free with sewing advice" ... as if her mother, dead for thirteen years, lived in the house next door and was integral to their lives (5). She recollects vaguely the incident that separated her from her family. Instigated by Noor's paintings she could recollect bits and pieces of the incident, like her father's "fishboat", a dead buffalo, etc. She remembers carrying a baby brother in her arms. Then suddenly the cyclone came which she remembers, Lifted Sajida from her feet ... The pole slipped from her grasp as if it had never been there, but she first held the baby and then her breath ... She was thrown so high, so far, so deep, the baby was wrenched from her arms ... while she awoke she was holding on to a dead buffalo (80). Sajida's narrative breaks and it is not until the end of the novel that she can remember much of the incidents of her past life.

The notions of shame, social stigma, fear and loss of honour coming to them by sharing about violence mostly sexual in nature also render them voiceless. Ultimately there is

not much difference in the nationalist's project whose effort is to reinforce silence and a social activist's effort to slacken silence. Sharengla, after being rejected by her lover, friends and society loses herself in grief and trauma. The Bible and the word of God becomes her only refuge. She is unable to grasp her own feelings and emotions and could not even decide what she should think of the man whom she had loved but who had deceived her. Later Sharengla develops hatred and contempt for all army men and begins to look at army men as a lusty figure, violent, liar, seeking worldly pleasures. Unable to express fully in words what she was going through, Sharengla tells Khating, "You have to be a woman to realize what war means" (3). A number of testimonials of survivors attest the presence of trauma and stress in their lives after the dreadful events of Partition/war. According to Cathy Caruth, "trauma is insufficiently grasped at the time of its occurrence but acts as a haunting influence which not only insistently and intrusively returns but is experienced only belatedly" (4-5). Trauma, in the case of women survivors emanates from several sources such as:

> witnessing unbelievable levels and unimaginable kinds of violence and being faced with the sudden and inexplicable loss of family members, home and community, to more culturally specific ones, such as experiencing shame at the 'loss' of one's purity, in turn followed by social rejection; experiencing society's intolerance of visible reminders of such 'impurity', the most significant being children born to raped and abducted women; witnessing suicides by the killing of family members (mainly women and children) by other family members when confronted by certain knowledge of violence and/or death at the hands of the 'other' (Kamra 166).

Trauma overwhelms the individual with intense fear, terror and hopelessness which makes the experience non-representable by language, making the memory of violence a very private affair for most of the survivors. Pierre Jenet has coined the term 'traumatic memory' in order to refer to memory of trauma which haunts the survivor (Anthony and Stein 255). It is different from normal memory because it is a solitary activity of the survivor and it is not addressed to anyone. Ora Avni points out that speech acts depend on a 'pre-existing convention shared by the community of listeners' (212). Speech governs certain rules regarding what is speakable, and what is not, but sometimes that 'pre-existing condition' does not apply to what the survivor has to tell. It becomes very difficult for the survivor to establish her truth because what she has to say fall too far outside the conventions of ordinary speech. This becomes all the more difficult due to lack of archive to support the claim.

It is only through fictional and non-fictional testimonials written and collected by writers, researchers and scholars that an attempt can be made to represent the unrepresentable by filling in missing pieces of particular narratives. The writers and scholars mediate the

memories of the survivors in order to give a more coherent shape to the survivor's memories. Two forces come to work in fiction: historical fact and imaginative truth. They bear witness to the entire business of partition/war, to the feelings of bewilderment and loss, to the horrific experiences to which women were subjected. Fiction becomes a source through which the reality of partition/war can be made possible for the imagination.

Fiction also helps in addressing the silences in the narratives of the survivors. The silence on the part of both the perpetrator and the victim about the violence of war makes it impossible to come to any sort of reconciliation between them. Nevertheless most traumatized victims feel the need of having their memories acknowledged, the need of bringing a resolution, of speaking and quenching the anger that is raging within them. Sorayya Khan, in her interview with Cara Cilano says that "pointing out the silences and acknowledging them is the first step towards healing" (xiii). An interesting thing that Khan has done in *Noor* is to bring up the perspective on war of both the victim and the perpetrator of violence together. Khan addresses the silences on the part of both perpetrator and the victim and brings them to reconciliation. Thus, fiction can create the space for victims and perpetrators of violence during partition to articulate a coherent narrative of their memories which can lead to the healing of society as a whole. Khan says that the excavation of individual and collective memories can help uncover the 'tragedies in the drawers of Pakistan's own histories' (xix). Khan tells the story of the civil war of 1971 in the "theatre of the family" and tells about what war can do to people. Khan uses the strategy of using fragments of memory of the different characters in bridging the "emotional distances between characters even as it threatens to sever their emotional connections completely" (Cilano xviii). Khan ends the novel with an act of reconciliation between the father and the daughter. Ali, who eventually evolves as the perpetrator of violence, directly articulates his deeds in front of the person he had wronged, his daughter. He is able to justify his past actions by looking at wars as a social event, which forces people to take sides and do things which a person might not actually want to do. He says,

> War is war ... people die. Study war ...History, great battles fought and lost or fought and won, right? In all of them. People die. War is war. You understand? (190)

Ali is able to channelize his trauma into a culturally provided outlet. Sajida is also finally healed of her pain and trauma. She is ultimately able to recall everything about the incident - how she had fallen into the pit of corpses and how Ali had picked her from the roadside and "made her his" (Khan 2006, 50). She forgives her father saying,

> Once, her father had been a soldier. In those nine months, he'd killed. He hadn't wanted to, she insisted to herself. War is war, he'd said (199).

Finally, Sajida is able to form a coherent view of her past and her identity. The novel

ends happily as the characters unite once again. Khan says that the excavation of the individual and collective memories can uncover the "tragedies in the drawers of Pakistan's own histories" (Cilano xix), and such excavation of memories can lead to healing and peace in society.

In *Love in the Time of Insurgency*, Bhattacharya emphasizes on the role women can play in bringing about peace in society after conflict. Interestingly, women are often excluded from the peace negotiation process in the post-conflict reconstruction period. In *Love in the Time of Insurgency*, after the war, while men discussed and decided in meetings, the women were given the task of only preparing tea for the male members. Many thinkers have highlighted that the peace process post conflict do not address women's needs. But considering how greatly women have been victimized during war, they deserve to be heard. Azza Karam says that "studies indicate that sustainable peace is one that is supported and consolidated at the grassroot level, whereas a peace negotiated solely among the elite and without the participation of the majority of people, tends to generate a certain degree of instability" (Kaufman and Williams 87) And, since women are "positioned differently" than men in society, they are likely to have different priorities. In a Naga society, men are placed as the decision makers in both private and public affairs and a women could only watch and wait. But, while most men in the story were inflicted by different ideals - Naga patriarchy in Ngathingkhui's case, Christian patriarchy in and Naga freedom in Videsselie's case, which only could lead to more war and violence, Bhattacharya has interestingly portrayed Sharengla, the most wronged character in the story, as an ambassador of peace. In the very beginning, she makes a very strong appeal to Ishewara, "Throw away your gun and set yourself free", which itself carries the universal appeal to peace. Even after she is rejected by society, she hardly shows any contempt towards anyone. Rishang, the advocate for peace, while finds it difficult to share his peaceful ideas with his male friends, finds a true friend in Sharengla, as she not only listens to and understands his ideas but also believes and contributes to his ideas. In fact, often Rishang would be so impressed by the presence of common sense in her that he, despite all his bias against her, was forced to say that he "felt she was an equal". Sharengla accepts God and the Bible with all her heart and prays for world peace. She talks of a warless world and reads from the Bible where it is mentioned that true peace resided in everyone's heart and mind. She also dedicates herself to the service of God and mankind by becoming a nurse in a hospital. Thus, she is able to divert herself from her grief and pain by giving herself to love. Her decision to adopt Koncheng and love the motherless boy shows her extreme selflessness. Kaufman and Williams have highlighted that a woman can either take an overtly feminist stance or work for peace as wives or mother, that is, employing a more traditional perspective. Sharengla chooses the later as the traditional approach gave her the access that she had been denied otherwise. She worked within the bounds of the

traditional patriarchal structure and contributed whatever she could by adopting the role of a nurturer. According to cultural norms, the private sphere of domestic-family space is women's provenance, and when they enter the public space they bring 'feminine qualities' of home with them. Sharengla as a good friend to Rishang, a good sister to Phanitphang and a good mother to Koncheng, Jivan's son, is a strong symbol of women as the nurturers, healers and reconcilers. The character thus highlights the vital but often unrecognized role played by women in averting violence and resolving conflict.

End Notes

See William Van Schendel's A History of Bangladesh.

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