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Saikia, Yasmin (2011) *Women, War, and the Making of Bangladesh: Remembering 1971*, Durham: Duke University Press. 311 pages, ISBN: 9780822350385

- 1 When remembering the civil war between East and West Pakistan in 1971, most accounts are told from a nationalistic perspective, demonizing the Other and focusing on the strength, perseverance, and in the case of the Bengalis, glory and triumph over West Pakistan. In such accounts, women's involvement in the war, as fighters, social workers, and civilian victims of tremendous violence, is often left out as it would disrupt the smooth surface of national history. As recorded by Saikia in one interview with a prominent Bengali freedom fighter,

This talk about women and rape is okay to an extent. But the kind of history that should be written about the war is the glorious victory of the Bangladeshis against the Pakistanis. Rape happened in the war. But this is not something to tell the future generation (p.79).¹

- 2 While Saikia includes the testimonies of both Bangladeshi and Pakistani men who fought in the war, her account of the 1971 war is unique in that she primarily focuses on the experiences of women who lived through and survived the war. By bringing the experiences of Bangladeshi women from diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds into the spotlight, Saikia not only challenges the often one-sided and nationalistic accounts of the war, but she also produces an alternative discourse that reveals an opportunity for reconciliation to heal the wounds of war which are still festering today among those who experienced the war or its aftereffects. Within the pages of *Women, War, and the Making of Bangladesh: Remembering 1971*, an image of what reconciliation could look like

begins to take shape, as not only a dialogue between female victims of violence (who, as 'tainted women', have been denied full participation in post-liberation Bangladesh) and their male perpetrators, but also as a dialogue between Bengalis and Biharis (who fought bitterly during the war and remain at odds today).²

- 3 At its roots, the 1971 civil war was a conflict over the treatment of East Pakistan as a colony of West Pakistan, from the time of Pakistan's formation in 1947. This included the economic exploitation of East Pakistan's majority Bengali population and the denial of their equal participation in the political process. In the 1950s, the build-up to the war also took on a strong cultural and linguistic dynamic, as the Bengali people were denied the right to speak their mother tongue, Bangla, in government offices and for a short period of time in schools. During the war, the majority of Bangladesh's small Urdu-speaking Bihari population sided with West Pakistan to keep the country united. After 9 months of fighting, and the rebirth of East Pakistan as the independent nation of Bangladesh, the Biharis were deemed to be traitors and were stripped of their citizenship and property and interned in refugee camps to await repatriation to Pakistan. To this day 160,000 Urdu-speaking Biharis remain living in 116 camps across Bangladesh.
- 4 *Women, War, and the Making of Bangladesh: Remembering 1971* is composed of three distinct sections. Part I serves as the introduction, in which Saikia lays out her methods, develops and debates theoretical frameworks for writing about violence particularly in the context of South Asia, and gives a historical overview of the war and the period of political turbulence leading up to it. Part II recounts the stories of women who experienced the war either as civilian victims of violence or as participants in the liberation movement, while Part III documents the testimonies of Pakistani and Bangladeshi men who fought in the war. Through Saikia's methods, in which she combines archival research and in-depth interviews, a very compelling account of the war is produced which reveals the physical as well as psychological destruction caused by the war.
- 5 The key theoretical framework developed in Part I, which frames the personal accounts documented in Part II and III, is based on the concept of *insaniyat*, meaning a shared sense of humanity and interconnectedness (in Urdu). This concept is elaborated on by Saikia through Sufi and Bhakti teachings as well as the work of renowned philosophers and poets such as Iqbal, Lalonde and Rumi. Through these teachings it is described how *insaniyat* is destroyed through acts of violence, and how its destruction is in essence a form of self destruction. In addition, for human beings to retain their sense of *insaniyat* they must 'develop a vigilant outlook not to lose awareness of the Other, because it is in the other's well being that the survival of the self is possible' (p.24). This humanistic framework helps the reader grapple with the testimonies of the victims and the perpetrators of violence, and contributes to building a platform for reconciliation.
- 6 Part II constitutes the main section of the book in which women's experiences of victimization and resistance during the war are told. In recounting the stories of women who were victimized, Saikia focuses less on the details of assault, rape and torture, which the women often had few words to describe, and more on what they were able to articulate. What the women recall is how men's acts of violence turned the known spaces of their homes and villages or cities into unknown and fearsome places due to the fact that these spaces carried the memories of horrific violence witnessed or

experienced by them. Through these descriptions, the reader is made aware of the full extent of how the violence altered the course of women's lives.

- 7 In the experience of one Bihari woman, as recorded by Saikia, the act of having to throw away the bodies of her two youngest children, who starved to death during the time that they (and other members of the Bihari community) were interned in their town's jail, turned her town into a graveyard and her ordinary life into one filled with extraordinary suffering. While living with these haunting memories must be a cause great mental anguish, the dehumanizing act of discarding the bodies of one's children without a proper burial, and the fact that they were, 'used, abused, and discarded in the war without anyone taking note of it' may be one of the greatest sources of suffering for this woman and others who experienced similar traumas (p.96).
- 8 With this in mind, Saikia's *Women, War, and the Making of Bangladesh: Remembering 1971* makes a significant contribution to the war literature by documenting the untold stories and the unaccounted suffering of Bangladeshi women. What feels left out of Part II though, is an analysis at the end of the section to help the reader process these intense and shocking stories. Instead, after the narration of the last story, we are launched into Part III.
- 9 Part III not only takes the place of a much needed conclusion to Part II, but it also forms a rushed and underdeveloped finale to the book. In this section, Saikia engages in a discussion with the perpetrators of violence (including both Pakistani and Bangladeshi men), as a way to initiate a dialogue for reconciliation. Saikia explains that she developed this section of the book after meeting Kajol, a Bengali freedom fighter, who is still coming to terms with his vicious attempt to rape his female neighbour during the war (whom he had previously considered to be like a sister, but in wartime Bangladesh reduced her to a label—a pro-Pakistani Bihari) (p.215). It is through Kajol's story that Saikia became interested in documenting men's memories of their acts of violence against women, and how they have struggled since the time of the war to re-develop their sense of humanity. While such a dialogue between perpetrators and victims is a critical component of the reconciliation process and restoration of *insaniyat*, it remains sorely underdeveloped in Part III; but perhaps this is something that cannot take place in the format of a monograph, and therefore Saikia could have only hinted at it.
- 10 In conclusion, perhaps the most significant contribution Saikia's book makes to the 1971 war literature is that it breaks the exclusive claim by Bengalis on the experience of violence during the war by documenting the experiences of both Bihari and Bengali women as well as women of other ethnic and religious backgrounds. To the best of my knowledge, there are no other accounts of the war which humanize the Bihari community and show how they too suffered great traumas during the war. Through the stories of Bihari women, we learn that,
They [Bihari women] understand that it was their vulnerability that made them targets of unwonted (*sic*) violence, just like the Bengali women who suffered because they were vulnerable. This understanding enables them to close the yawning gap between the Bengali and Bihari survivors and make peace with them in their hearts (p.153).
- 11 Saikia leaves us with the question of whether it is possible to now move beyond talk and actualize a sense of peace and interconnectedness in Bangladesh.

- 12 As the Hardt-Nickachos Chair in Peace Studies and Professor of History at Arizona State University, Yasmin Saikia makes a significant contribution to the 1971 war literature through *Women, War, and the Making of Bangladesh: Remembering 1971*, and a bold first step towards reconciliation and the restoration of *insaniyat*. This book would appeal to a diverse set of audiences including those living in or from the South Asian subcontinent whose lives have been directly or indirectly affected by the war. In addition, Saikia's book is a thought provoking read for scholars and students in the fields of Women and Gender Studies, Peace and Conflict Studies, and South Asian Studies.
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NOTES

1. This war veteran, in his second interview with Saikia (four years after their first meeting), admitted that the violence committed against women during the war was wrong and that people should be aware of their suffering. Such a significant change of heart suggests that the war is still very much present in people's minds and that opinions have not been fixed about what should be remembered and recorded.
 2. As noted by Saikia, "the term *Bihari* is not meant to identify the people of Bihar. Instead, a variety of Urdu-speaking people who had migrated from India to East Pakistan after partition were commonly referred to as Bihari in order to distinguish them from the local Bengalis" (p. 243).
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