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Reviews

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mentioned in the book, aside from a few scattered mentions of Parsi stereotypes. How far, in short, can the nuancing of the category of the ‘colonial’ go before we lose focus with respect to which social groups and political-economic positions predictably benefited, and which did not, under the colonial pattern of rule? That being said, *A Joint Enterprise* is a major accomplishment, clearly the product of intensive research over many years by a scholar deeply committed to and knowledgeable in her chosen field. In the acknowledgements, Chopra suggests that the research on which the book is based can sustain another book-length project. I, along with other readers, I am sure, look forward to more work by her on this important world city.

AHMED KANNA
UNIVERSITY OF THE PACIFIC, STOCKTON, USA
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Women, War, and the Making of Bangladesh: Remembering 1971. By Yasmin Saikia. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011. Pp. 336. ISBN 9780822350385. \$24.95 (pbk).

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Yasmin Saikia’s *Women, War, and the Making of Bangladesh* is one among several monographs that will be released to coincide with the fortieth anniversary of the independence of Bangladesh. It considers 1971 not through accounts of guerrilla battles, political intrigue or refugee migrations, but by presenting ethnographies of women whose bodies became a battleground on which war was waged. Turning her attention to those who, by virtue of their undeniable structural vulnerability, were particularly targeted as objects of violence, Saikia points out a major lacuna in

the official archive – what we might call the open wound, from which nationalist histories of Bangladesh have averted their eyes. Though the prevalence of rape has been contested by some, including Sharmila Bose in *Dead Reckoning: Memories of the 1971 Bangladesh War* (2011), few scholars of the region contest its deployment as a weapon during the war. Indeed, at the war’s end, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, Bangladesh’s first president, proclaimed that Bengali women who had been raped would henceforth be known as *birangonas*, war heroines. The translation of sexual violence against non-combatants into a military idiom of expected sacrifice proleptically attempted to make sense of the seemingly unthinkable and to offer it a recuperative future. These daughters of the nation were to be hallowed alongside their *mukti bahini* brethren as having made possible, through their noble suffering, Bangladesh’s freedom. Ironically, these women have fallen out of the official historical archive, and Saikia aims to clear a space from which they might speak.

Women, War, and the Making of Bangladesh is divided into three sections: the first section traces the methodological stakes of the project, the epistemological challenges posed by the historical and cultural silences around women’s experiences of violence during the war. Saikia suggests that paying critical attention to the ways in which rape dehumanizes both its victim and its perpetrator might offer a more nuanced understanding of the complexities of war and its memorialization. What would it mean for Bangladesh to acknowledge the rapes of the women who it holds as its national metonym? The book’s second section, entitled ‘Survivors Speak’, begins an attempt to answer this question by compiling first-hand accounts of women who have lived to see the aftermath of sexual violence in war. Though individually framed

by Saikia's descriptions of locating research subjects and the questions that guided her study, the narratives themselves far exceed and excitingly destabilize her academic disciplining efforts. As such, they are, undeniably, the book's most compelling contribution to the field. The final section, 'A New Beginning', briefly draws together excerpts from interviews with former Pakistani soldiers and a philosophical consideration of the possibility of a humanist closure.

The book's focus, the collected narratives of the women – victims of rape, social workers and soldiers – resists the nationalist histories that have elided or erased their very presence. As ethnographer and historian, Saikia resists offering much in the way of interpretation in her framing, but the nature of the stories and their presentation articulate an argument about gendered violence. The accounts of women who were raped during the war are wrenching, and often hard to read, but they refuse any easy diagnosis of victimhood. Instead, they articulate the intimacy and insidiousness of sexual violence: that rape became a weapon of war precisely because of the deep structural vulnerability of women, across ethnicity, religion and class. In each account a transgenerational, or perhaps more aptly, a matrilineal history of subjugation and violence is evoked. The state's designation of *birangona* depends upon a temporal condensation whereby a single act (though it might have been repeated) of violence fixes an individual (though she might have been one of many) into a representational trope. The accounts of Nur Begum and her daughter Beauty, of Firdousi Priyabhasani, of Taslima's mother who is never given her own name, of the Bihari women who speak in a cacophony of collective anonymity, refuse the *violence* of singularity; they refuse the ideological violence

by which rape, imprisonment, destitution and disenfranchisement are figured as exceptional conditions of war.

The collection of narratives gathered in the book stands potentially to change the field of study on Bangladesh and the subcontinent, and offers a rich archive to scholars for future study. However, Saikia's ethnographic methodology opens up several problems. While the account of violence against Biharis, an Urdu-speaking community targeted for violence during the war as collaborators with the Pakistan army, is but one of the ethnographies, it fundamentally structures the project. Saikia's attention to the subjugation of Bihari women during and after the war importantly makes visible the attendant violences of Bangladeshi ethnolinguistic nationalism. However, Saikia so vigorously condemns the systematic and reprehensible persecution of Biharis as to construct an equally problematic dialectic in its place – the designation throughout of 'the Other' against whom harm is directed, and 'the perpetrator' of said harm – and subsequently refuses the preponderance of violence towards Hindus and other minority populations. This is a troubling ideological simplification in Saikia's analysis, but one that is ultimately destabilized by the narratives she has compiled. Moreover, it is incongruous with the book's commendable and important project of complicating histories of Bangladesh's birth. The recorded histories in the book are a powerful counterhistory, standing in abeyance of the official accounts that would deny their existence, and repudiate their calls for justice: they are necessary reading for any scholar of the region.

POULOMI SAHA
BROWN UNIVERSITY, USA
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