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WHEN THE BODY BECOMES A BATTLEFIELD: GENOCIDAL RAPE AND TRAUMA IN  
SHAHEEN AKHTAR'S *THE SEARCH*

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ABSTRACT

The Bangladesh War of Independence is considered to be one of the most brutal and barbaric genocides of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Politicians, litterateurs, researchers, social workers and the like have read, re-read and written much about the proceedings during and after the Bangladesh War of Independence. Among those pieces of writings, the Bengali novel *Talaash* (2004) by Shaheen Akhtar has made a mark with its portrayal of an unusual and largely overlooked but highly significant theme. The novel deftly captures the life of *Biranganas*, the women who were raped particularly by the Pakistan army men during the war of independence. The paper attempts at reading *The Search* (2011), English translation of *Talaash*, using the framework of the Theory of Trauma as put forward by Judith Lewis Herman.

**Key Words:** Bangladesh, Genocide, Rape, Trauma Literature, War Trauma

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History has recorded many instances where women have been projected as either reasons or instruments for or victims of waging and winning wars. 20<sup>th</sup> Century has seen the worst version of it in what is called Genocidal Rape. It can be defined as the well planned, systematic sexual violence aimed at destroying a targeted group by inflicting utter humiliation and forcefully impregnating the group's women with the progeny of the perpetrators. In simpler terms, Genocidal Rape is the mass rape of civilian women committed usually by the opponent military forces as part of a war.

Though rapes have always been part of war, the use of it as a strategic tool or weapon on a large scale with a view to demoralizing the opponents has been brought to international attention with Beverley Allen's work *Rape Warfare: The Hidden Genocide in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Croatia* published in 1996, which officially

introduced the term Genocidal Rape. Instances of Genocidal Rape have been identified in the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945), the Yugoslav Wars (1991-1999), the Rwandan Genocide (1994), the ongoing war in the Darfur region of Sudan (2003- ), the Sri Lankan War and the like. And this list includes the Genocidal episode carried out in our neighbouring country Bangladesh, as part of the Liberation War in 1971, which began as a civil war between East Pakistan and West Pakistan, which were the two provinces of the Dominion of Pakistan and culminated in the birth of Bangladesh, a new country, from a long oppressed and sidelined East Pakistan.

The Guinness Book of Records lists the Bangladesh Liberation War as one of the top five genocides of 20<sup>th</sup> Century ([genocidebangladesh.org](http://genocidebangladesh.org)). The mass rapes of Bengali women carried out by the Pakistan army men as part of the war is considered

to be one of the most brutal crimes in human history. (*gendercide.org*).

As in the case of every other atrocity in the history of mankind, art and literature have taken interest in documenting the episode of the brutalities in Bangladesh too. Politicians, litterateurs, researchers, social workers and the like have read, re-read and written much about the proceedings during and after the Bangladesh War of Independence.

Among those pieces of writings, the Bengali novel *Talaash* (2004) by Shaheen Akhtar and its English translation *The Search* (2011) by Ella Dutta have made a mark. Shaheen Akhtar is an economist and social activist living in Dhaka who has written two novels, *Palabar Path Nei* (No Exit, 2000) and *Talaash* (The Search, 2004) and four collections of short stories. *The Search* is her second novel and it portrays an unusual and largely overlooked but highly significant theme. The novel deftly captures the life of *Biranganas*, the women who were raped particularly by the Pakistan army men during the war of independence.

*Biranganas* – translated as ‘the warrior women or the women of valour’ – is the title officially given by the State to a particular class of women who were raped and tortured by the Pakistan army men during the war of Independence in 1971. It was a common practice during the war that women – whether married or unmarried, old or young – get abducted by the Pakistan army men to fulfil their carnal desires. The concerned authorities kept mum regarding this inhumanness because it was considered to be the necessity of the hour: “Living in fear of the unseen enemy, the Pakistani soldiers are losing their reason. They are directionless. Under pressure in this way, they will lose their confidence and will be unable to fight. They will remember their homes. . . That is why the authorities have lifted all restrictions. The soldiers can loot, murder, rape as freely as they like. These acts fuel the tempo of the war” (Akhtar115-16).

After the war, these women, who were objects of pleasure for the enemy during the days of trouble, are hailed as the most pure pieces of worship by the new government. There is an instance in the novel when *Bangabandhu* Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, who appears as a character in the

novel exhorts: “You are my mothers. You are *Biranganas*” (Akhtar 300).

But the irony is that what *Biranganas* had to face in the so-called liberated Bangladesh during the years following the independence was greater humiliation and mental torture compared to the physical ordeal they had undergone during the days of war. The rehabilitation of these women remained in papers and proposals. They were evicted from the mainstream society as objects of scorn. Even the family members treated them as “trash left behind by the army” (282).

The novel problematizes this predicament of the *Biranganas*.

During the days of the Civil War the Pakistan Army abducts Mariam, the protagonist, and many other women. The army men brutally rape the women day and night. The helpless victims also undergo cruel physical tortures. They are not even permitted to wear anything but their under clothes in fear of them using their sarees and salwars as noose for hanging themselves! After nine months of endless pain, the *Muktijodhas* or the freedom fighters save Mariam and other women who are yet to die.

Immediately after independence the new nation of Bangladesh takes over the responsibility of the so-called rehabilitation of the *Biranganas*. Almost all the women in the army camp have been impregnated by the army men and the first step of the rehabilitation is to provide for an abortion for those pregnant women who are still in a safe period for abortion. For those who have crossed the safe period, the nation would provide for the charges of the delivery and the children would be packed abroad for adoption by foreign childless couples! Mariam is among the pregnant women who get the benefit of help for abortion. The rehabilitation centre also facilitates marriages of the raped women to willing suitors. The government even gives away gifts like sewing machines and ornaments for the couples.

Despite all its earnest efforts, the new nation of Bangladesh fails miserably in its mission of rehabilitating *Biranganas*. The mission of rehabilitation falls on the shoulders of *Biranganas* themselves.

The novel realistically portrays the stories of these *Biranganas*– Mariam, Tuki, Anuradha, Shobha Rani, Shyamali, Bindubala and many more. Some of them commit suicide, some turn to prostitution for a living, some escape to foreign countries. Whatever the case may be, every *Birangana* is destined to live with unending pain and sheer shame.

The paper attempts at reading the Trauma endured by Mariam and other *Biranganas* like her in the light of the studies of Judith Lewis Herman on Rape and its traumatic aftermath and the stages of recovery as put forward in her ground breaking work *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (1992).

Herman recalls the work of Ann Burgess, a psychiatric nurse, and Lynda Holmstrom, a sociologist, who, in 1972 identified a pattern of psychological reactions in rape victims which they called Rape Trauma Syndrome. Later, the symptoms identified by them were incorporated in Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) as defined by the III edition of *the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* published by the American Psychiatric Association in 1980. PTSD includes a set of psycho-social responses by a victim of a traumatic event as an aftermath of the experience. Herman classifies the cardinal symptoms of PTSD in to three main categories. They are:

- 1) **Hyperarousal** which includes sudden startling, irritable reaction to small provocation, poor sleep etc.
- 2) **Intrusion** or memory of the traumatic event as flashbacks during waking states and traumatic nightmares during sleep.
- 3) **Constriction** or numbness characterised by a detached calm in which terror, rage and pain dissolve, indifference, emotional detachment and a detached state of consciousness.

All these three symptomatic categories can be identified in Akhtar's Novel *The Search*. Mariam, immediately after escaping from the army captivity and finding refuge in a hospital is diagnosed of psychosis owing to her "loss of sleep, lack of appetite, fainting fits, running around and

restlessness" (Akhtar 200). Similarly, the reader finds an easily provoked Mariam in many instances like when faced by questions regarding the details of her captivity. When Mukti, the researcher doing case studies on *Biranganas* asks her in an interview about her plans to leave the country, she bursts out: " ' I f I stayed behind in my country, where would I have lived, what would I have done, were all these questions settled then? Are they worked out even now?" (Akhtar122). Seeing Mariam violently perturbed, Mukti stops asking questions regarding the same.

Secondly, there are a lot of instances in the novel signifying the intrusion of the traumatic memories of what she had endured in to Mariam's consciousness. Her ordeals continue to torture her through dreams and flashbacks:

Even in the sunny, airy afternoons in Mariam's new home, the claustrophobic atmosphere of that hall room of 1971 settled in. If she opened the doors and windows, the people from her lost past entered. One by one, they took possession of the bed, the chairs, the sofa set, the carpet, the threshold – everything (Akhtar 244)... She had nightmares. She felt that somebody was sitting on her chest and crushing her heart. The man's face could not be seen. But his eyes glinted like a cat's. From her chest, two hairy hands moved up to her throat. The fingers were like coppery claws. He was trying to strangle her. Mariam screamed – but the tortured sound that came out was like a cow being slaughtered (Akhtar 255).

Thirdly, there are instances where the raped women in the novel show symptoms of what Herman calls Constriction or a kind of numbness resulting from a traumatic experience: "They were intensely reluctant even to talk, let alone get married. They had been turned in to stones devoid of all emotion" (Akhtar 192). Similarly, Mariam's pathetic situation of not being able to take part in a sincere marital life has been mentioned: "Actually, she never took any part in it. The whole time she just lay there, as if submitting in the face of a gun" (Akhtar 246).

Herman opines that a traumatized individual going through the above-mentioned phases of PTSD will eventually tend to disconnect oneself from the world around: "Traumatic event call in to question basic human relationships. They breach the attachments of family, friendship, love and community" (Herman 36). After freed from captivity, Mariam feels complete alienation, being in a vacuum, disconnected from her friends, family and surroundings. She is not aware of and does not care about any kind of bonding and is drawn in to herself.

Though the cardinal symptoms of PTSD can define state of mind of a traumatised person to a large extent, Herman feels that the framework of PTSD is not potent enough to include the responses of a victim of a prolonged, repeated, chronic traumatic experience as it defines a victim of a single traumatic event. While the symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress recede gradually following a single traumatic event, the effects of a prolonged chronic traumatic experience last longer. Herman proposes a new term to include the symptoms which the victim of a prolonged trauma possesses, in addition to the usual symptoms of PTSD. She calls the set of symptoms displayed by a victim of a chronic prolonged traumatic experience, Complex Post Traumatic Stress Disorder or C-PTSD. Though prominent bodies of psychiatrists are yet to accept the term officially, it has already got wide currency in academic circles.

According to Herman, C-PTSD possesses the following symptoms in addition to the usual symptoms of PTSD:

- 1) **Robotization** or the feeling of being reduced in to a non-human life form.
- 2) **Trauma Bonding** or the feeling of solidarity the victims feel for one another or for the perpetrator.
- 3) **Dissociation or Doublethink** or the power of holding two contradictory beliefs or altered senses of reality at a time.
- 4) **Loss of Identity or Personality Changes** or feeling that oneself is a totally different person.

As Genocidal Rape is a prolonged chronic traumatic experience, Herman's concept of C-PTSD offers a

better understanding of the novel *The Search*. There are instances in the novel where the raped women feel to have lost their state of being human. Repeated brutal rapes make them nothing more than mere vegetable: "Mariam 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.... She had such a lust for life and now she does not know whether she is alive or dead" (Akhtar 4, 117). The shock of being made only a powerless, unresponsive instrument of pleasure in the hands of the perpetrators continue even after set free in the case of the rape victims.

Trauma Bonding or the attachment which the victims feel among themselves on the face of torture can be seen in the captives of the novel too. The women, while staying in the dark cells of the army camp develop a feeling of affinity for each other, which helps them to live long. The strangest form of Trauma Bonding which is otherwise called Stockholm Syndrome, in which the victim feels an attachment towards the perpetrator, can be seen in the case of Mariam. She feels a romantic affinity towards two of her rapists whom she identifies as Ishtiaque I and II respectively. After the war is ended she even considers going with Ishtiaque II to Pakistan. The memories about them intrude in to her consciousness as hallucinations and dreams in many instances too.

Instances of Dissociation can also be pointed out in the novel. There is an occasion, where Mariam, at the height of torture dissociates herself from the original space where she is actually in. While being in a shabby room full of dirt and spittle, Mariam feels to be in a beautiful room where there are harmonium and tablas, oil paintings on the wall, red roses on the table and snow white linen on the bed. She never realizes that she has had a hallucination. When Mukti, about the place from where she was rescued, initially she tells that she has been in a beautiful room. But later, supported by the information provided by a rescuer, Mukti questions Mariam's claim. At that point she totally denies her previous words about the condition of the room she has been in. Thus, he argues at

different points that she has had experienced the two atmospheres. Such episodes of Dissociation or the power of holding contradictory senses at a time is a sort of coping mechanism displayed by human mind on the face of calamity.

After her release, Mariam constantly feels that she has become a different personality. She also feels that she has lost her old identity: "...she was (merely) obscuring her past. Indeed, she can no longer live with that past identity: (Akhtar 113). She comes out of the torture camp a totally changed personality. She loses her love for life and begins to live just for the sake of living.

Herman concludes her seminal work by identifying three stages of recovery for trauma victims. They are:

- 1) Establishing Safety
- 2) Remembering and Mourning
- 3) Reconnection to Everyday Life

According to Herman, the victims go through these stages with or without clinical help in their journey to attain recovery. These stages can also be identified in Shaheen Akhtar's novel. The newly formed nation of Bangladesh makes efforts to rehabilitate the escaped *Biranganas* in a safe atmosphere. The state attempts at marrying off *Biranganas* to families willing to accept them. When the state-sponsored rehabilitation becomes a failure, the *Biranganas* try to make arrangements by themselves to find a safe atmosphere. Anyhow, the novelist acknowledges the need for ensuring safety for a trauma victim.

There is an instance in the novel where a conference of the survivors of the Genocidal rape is being organized to provide an opportunity for them to remember and mourn their losses that would definitely provide a cathartic effect to their unresolved traumatic memories. Mukti, the researcher who is making a case study on *Biranganas* conducts a conference in which the raped women are made to pour out their cluttered memories about the brutal experiences. Here the author appears to be supporting Herman's projection of remembering and mourning as an important step towards attaining a healed psyche.

The final goal of all the attempts at rehabilitating the trauma victims and resolving their

pathogenic memories is to reconnect the trauma victims to everyday life and to make them normal human beings again. Though this goal is mentioned indirectly at many places in the novel, sadly, it is not attained ultimately. When the novel closes with an ambiguous note of Mariam embarking on a mysterious boat journey, possibly signifying her death, the reader gets informed of the still unresolved problem of *Biranganas*, the raped women, in spite of the many efforts that have been made from various quarters.

Thus, the novel, when analysed based on the theoretical framework of trauma as put forward by Judith Lewis Herman, gives a better understanding about the process of trauma and recovery associated with the highly pathogenic and distressing experience of mass rape called Genocidal Rape.

*The Search* has served its purpose to be a disturbing take on the pseudo-pride and confidence of independent Bangladesh as it throws light on the ever-ignored case of *Biranganas*, who have sacrificed their honour, life and everything for the sake of the country's freedom. It is a powerful piece of testimonial literature which forces the reader to think about the plight of those scapegoats and thereby it adds to the process of rehabilitating the helpless souls. In that sense the novel is truly a social reform.

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