Comics As a Tool for Research on Gender Violence. Interview With Nayanika Mookherjee on the Graphic Novel *Birangona. Towards Ethical Testimonies of Sexual Violence During Conflict* (2019)

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Comics As a Tool for Research on Gender Violence. Interview With Nayanika Mookherjee on the Graphic Novel *Birangona. Towards Ethical Testimonies of Sexual Violence During Conflict* (2019)

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Comics and the recently emerged graphic novel format are among the art forms that researchers have chosen to disseminate and provide a visual representation of their work. This relationship between comics and research, which is part of a practice labelled as "arts-based research", has been facilitated by comics' recognised narrative and didactic abilities. Research on gender-based violence has not been deaf to the call of comics art, and, in some rare but interesting cases, it has exploited the features of the medium to visualise and circulate research findings. An example is the graphic novel *Birangona* (Mookherjee & Najmun Nahar, 2019; Durham University), authored by the researcher Nayanika

Mookherjee and by the comics artist Najmun Nahar Keya, which was circulated, both in an online and paper version, with the aim of popularizing a set of guidelines on how to conduct oral history data collection with survivors of wartime rape. This interview with Professor Nayanika Mookherjee, the co-author of the graphic novel and the anthropologist who conducted the research with wartime rape testimonies from which the guidelines were taken, has the objective of presenting the arts-based research project *Birangona* and discussing, in a scholarly fashion, the implementation of visual arts methodologies (and comics-based methodologies in particular) to research gender violence.

Keywords: arts-based research, gender-based violence, wartime rape, *Birangona*, comics, graphic novels

A Banda Desenhada Como Ferramenta Para Investigação Sobre Violência de Género. Entrevista com Nayanika Mookherjee Sobre o Romance Gráfico Birangona. Para Testemunhos Éticos de Violência Sexual Durante Conflitos (2019)

A banda desenhada e o recente formato de romance gráfico estão entre as formas de arte que os investigadores escolheram para divulgar e fornecer uma representação visual do seu trabalho. Esta relação entre banda desenhada e a investigação, que faz parte de uma prática rotulada como "investigação baseada nas artes", tem sido facilitada pelas reconhecidas capacidades narrativas e didáticas da banda desenhada. A investigação sobre a violência baseada no género não tem sido indiferente ao apelo da banda desenhada, e, em alguns casos raros, mas interessantes, explora as características do meio para visualizar e fazer circular os resultados da investigação. Exemplo disso é o romance gráfico Birangona (Mookherjee & Najmun Nahar, 2019; Durham University), da autoria da investigadora Nayanika Mookherjee e da artista de banda desenhada Najmun Nahar Keya, distribuído em versão digital e em papel, para popularizar um conjunto de orientações para conduzir a recolha de dados de história oral junto de sobreviventes de violação em tempos de guerra. Esta entrevista com a Professora Nayanika Mookherjee, coautora do romance gráfico e antropóloga que conduziu a investigação com testemunhos de violações em tempos de guerra dos quais foram retiradas as orientações, pretende apresentar o projeto de investigação baseado nas artes Birangona e discutir, a nível académico, a implementação de metodologias de artes visuais (metodologias baseadas em banda desenhada em particular) para investigar a violência de género.

Palavras-chave: *investigação baseada nas artes, violência baseada no género, violação em tempos de guerra, Birangona, banda desenhada, romances gráficos*

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"Arts-based research", or "artistic research", as some prefer to call it, is far from being a new methodology in the field of scholarly production. Arts-based research practices started to emerge between the 1970s and the 1980s, when a climate of growing experimentation resulted in the implementation of artistic methods in the field of psychological and medical therapy, which consequently opened to the use of art in other fields of research (Leavy, 2015, pp. 25–26). Despite still struggling to gain full academic recognition and legitimation, the use of creative methodologies in research is now a reality in various fields: from business and management (Ward & Shortt, 2020), to education (Morris & Paris, 2021), to social and health sciences (Gerber et al., 2020). One of the most recurring applications of arts-based research is in the area of research dissemination. Arts such as photography and audio-visual creation are nowadays frequently employed by scholars who want to guarantee a wide and accessible circulation of their research findings.

Comics and the recently emerged graphic novel format (Eisner, 2012) are among the art forms researchers have chosen to provide a visual representation of their work. Comics' recognised narrative and didactic abilities have facilitated the relationship between comics and research. As suggested by the frequently used label of "graphic narrative", which is now widely employed to identify works that avail of the comics medium, comics are characterised by a high degree of narrativity. That is guaranteed by one of the dominant principles of comics semiotics: sequentiality, which is to say, the juxtaposition, either in a strip, grid or less structured tabula, of panels that, if read in succession, assign temporality to the series of single images, thus allowing the storytelling practice (Groensteen, 1999/2007, p. 9). Moreover, comics have proved efficient as a didactic and teaching tool, as confirmed by scholarly research in the field of comics pedagogy and education (Kirtley et al., 2020) as well as by the new emerging editorial trend of the graphic guide, a label aimed at identifying informative texts built combining words and images[1]. In the course of their recent history, comics studies have frequently resorted to the medium of comics itself to provide readers with a clear and metareflective dissertation on comics' characteristics and potential. Two pivotal examples include the groundbreaking *Understanding Comics. The Invisible Art* (Tundra Publishing, 1993), a volume

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[1] Examples of popular graphic guides in the field of gender education include *Gender: A Graphic Guide,* by Meg-John Barker and Jules Scheele (Icon Books, 2019); *Feminism: A Graphic Guide*, by Cathia Jenainati, Jen Milton and Judy Groves (Icon Books, 2019); *Queer: A Graphic History*, by Meg-John Barker and Jules Scheele (Icon Books, 2016).

on comics theory explained through comics by the American cartoonist Scott McCloud, and the more recent *Unflattening* (Harvard University Press, 2015) by Nick Sousanis. But these are not the only examples of arts-based research in the field of comics. The blooming area recently labelled as "comics science" demonstrates the growing trend of selecting comics for scientific communication, dissemination and education (Farinella, 2018; Tatalovic, 2009).

Research on gender-based violence has not been deaf to the call of comics art, and, in some rare but interesting cases, it has exploited the features of the medium to visualise and circulate research findings. An example is the graphic novel *Birangona* (Mookherjee & Najmun Nahar, 2019), authored by the researcher Nayanika Mukherjee and by the comics artist Najmun Nahar Keya, which was circulated, both in an online and paper version, with the aim of popularizing a set of guidelines on how to conduct oral history data collection with survivors of wartime rape. *Birangona* contains a fictional story, that of the young woman Labony, who discovers that her grandmother is a *birangona* (the name, meaning "brave woman", used for victims of sexual violence raped in the 1971 war that resulted in the formation of Bangladesh) during a research she is asked to carry out in the context of a school project[2]. The comics' fictional story functions as a framework within which the instructions for ethically dealing with witnesses who suffered wartime rape are carefully outlined. The graphic novel and the short video created by assembling the images of the graphic novel are both available in English and Bangla, and they are freely downloadable at the following link: https://www.ethical-testimonies-svc.org.uk/.

The interview with Professor Nayanika Mookherjee, the co-author of the graphic novel and the anthropologist who conducted the research with wartime rape testimonies from which the guidelines were taken, was carried out virtually in May 2022. It aims to present the arts-based research project *Birangona* and discuss, in a scholarly fashion, the implementation of visual arts methodologies (and comics-based methodologies in particular) to research gender violence.

N. Mandolini: I would like to start by asking you to elaborate on the project that led to the publication of the graphic novel *Birangona. Towards Ethical Testimonies of Sexual Violence During Conflict.* What is the core of the research project, and how did it develop into the publication of an artistic work that selects comics as its medium of expression?

N. Mookherjee: The graphic novel *Birangona* draws on my book *The Spectral Wound: Sexual Violence, Public Memories, and the Bangladesh War of 1971* (Mookherjee, 2015). *The Spectral Wound* documents and analyses the public memory of wartime rape perpetrated by the West Pakistani army and local Bengali men in East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) during the Bangladesh war of 1971. It seeks to explore: how is the raped woman invoked in the public memory of 1971? What is the relationship between this public memory and the experiences

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[2] *Birangonas* were recognised by the state of Bangladesh and were sustained by national funding, which helped them find government jobs. The number of women affected by wartime rape in the Bangladesh war is approximately 200,000. See Mookherjee (2021b).

of women raped in 1971? The book tries to counter the limited and Orientalised understanding of the impacts of wartime rape, whereby the raped woman is only understood to be an "abnormal", horrific, dehumanized victim abandoned by kin. It ethnographically analyses the social life of testimonies, examining how the stories and experiences of raped women of the 1971 war became part of a broader set of national discourses and debates, bringing together testimonies and visual representations. It also examines how visual and literary representations of raped women create a public culture of "knowing" and remembering that, in turn, informs the processes of testifying and human rights policy-making. The book argues that identifying raped women only through their suffering creates a homogenous understanding of gendered victimhood. It also suggests that wartime rape is not experienced in the same way by all victims. *The Spectral Wound* instead seeks to highlight the varied experiences of wartime rape during 1971 through a political and historical analysis of wartime rape.

Addressing how the experiences of 1971 manifest today among women who are survivors themselves and their families, this book triangulates the narratives with various representations (state, visual, and literary) as well as with contemporary human rights testimonies. The volume thereby examines the circulation of press articles, a range of oral accounts (interviews, discussion, observation, rumours and gossip), images, literary representations, and testimonies of rape among survivors of sexual violence, their families, and communities, the left-liberal civil society, different governments and state actors. *The Spectral Wound* (Mookherjee, 2015) also reflects on the silence relating to the violation and rape of men and juxtaposes it with the public memory of the rape of women. That allows a theorisation of the relationship between the nation, sexuality, and masculinity and identifies issues of demasculinization in the husbands of raped women.

One of the central findings of *The Spectral Wound* (Mookherjee, 2015), which is also the focus of the graphic novel *Birangona*, is a critical understanding of the testimonial process. Interviews with survivors of wartime sexual violence show that with the focus on documentation of the experiences of wartime rape: (a) inadequate attention is paid to the conditions under which such testimonies are recorded; (b) as a result, ethical practices of documentation can be flouted by journalists, human rights activists, government officials, non-governmental organization (NGO) personnel, researchers in their pursuit of recording wartime rape, (c) hence, survivors can experience a double set of transgression in the very process of testifying to their violent experiences during wars, (d) hence, there can emerge a critical disconnection between survivors needs and transitional justice processes. The project of the graphic novel picks up on this central focus of how to ethically document testimonies of sexual violence in conflict and intertwines it with an intergenerational story through which accounts of these guidelines are narrated. The goal of this project was and is to contribute to the welfare of survivors by ensuring that their process of giving testimonies does not prove to be another source of trauma, along with past experiences of sexual violence. This can be possible by making academic work more accessible to non-academic individuals and organizations and by inviting them to implement the research

findings of *The Spectral Wound.*

N. Mandolini: Your project is an example of arts-based research where research findings are conveyed through artistic means or by a specific creative practice (in *Birangona*'s case, comics and a short film based on the same comics). In the introductory note to this issue, Ece Canlı and I argue that art-based research is extremely well suited to talk about gender violence and to convey research on the same topic (Canlı & Mandolini, 2022, p. 7). But I would like to know your opinion on this matter. What reasons led you to select this practice to discuss the ethical issues implied in research on gender violence? And how was the idea of carrying out an arts-based research project developed in terms of collaboration and production? I am thinking here about the relationship with the artist who drew *Birangona*, Najmun Nahar Keya — also a Bangladeshi woman, I suppose not by coincidence — and about the organisation of the work with her.

N. Mookherjee: Drawing on the long trajectory of comic books in South Asia that we, as children, grew up on, the decision to produce a graphic novel was initially based on my long-term engagement with ethics, which was core to my findings on wartime sexual violence. In 2003, I contributed an article on how to ethically record testimonies of sexual violence as part of an activist organisation and raised money for survivors. Thereafter, as the ethics officer of the Association of Social Anthropologists (ASA) of the UK and Commonwealth, I had, in consultation with the ASA members, updated the ASA ethics code to update it with the complexities of overt and covert research in the light of Human Terrain System where social scientists and psychologists were being hired by armies in Iraq and Afghanistan to give the occupied forces an insight into "cultures" to enable better compliance from local people. When my book was published in 2015, the interest in it and the kind of invitations I was receiving also made it imperative to develop a set of guidelines on how to ethically record testimonies of wartime sexual violence. These guidelines were central to my ethnography among the survivors.

After the publication of my book in 2015 and its South Asian version in 2016, I was invited to have a book launch event at the Centre for Women, Peace and Security at the London School of Economics in October 2016. The panellists for the book launch included academics as well as NGO leaders and government officials. I was also invited to speak at the Dhaka Literary Festival in November 2016 about the book and also launch the South Asian edition. I took this invitation as an opportunity to initiate the first collaborative workshop with my partners' Research Initiatives Bangladesh as well as invited participants, which included survivors who were in the public eye, academics, researchers, government officials, policymakers, NGO representatives, feminists and human rights activists, journalists, filmmakers, and photographers.

To be mindful of the survivors' concerns and not sensationalise their experiences for the purpose of testimonies, it is essential to have a set of guidelines to record their experiences. Guidelines that serve as a list of ethical practices were codeveloped through these workshops and are visualised through various

illustrations in a graphic novel, making them more accessible. These guiding principles help to raise questions among those seeking to record testimonies. Before the first workshop, I had started developing storyboards, and I was collaborating with Najmun Nahar Keya (a Bangladeshi visual artist) to develop the graphic novel. It was essential that it was a Bangladeshi graphic artist who co-authored this graphic novel with me to be able to capture the nuances and complexities of the history of sexual violence during 1971. Before the November 2016 workshop, I pre-distributed a set of guidelines based on my monograph; we developed these further based on the workshop participants' feedback. In the second half of the workshop, we developed the initial plans for the graphic novel.

After that first workshop, we further developed the guidelines via email, and the graphic novel came together through online exchanges across a 6-hour time difference over a span of 2 and a half years, with support from the Economic and Social Research Council's Impact Acceleration Account and Durham University's Research Impact Fund. I did the storyboards, wrote the script, shared images with Keya and explained to her the kind of representational aesthetics I had in mind. She, in turn, brought her long-term experience as a graphic artist to our narrative to suggest ways of doing the graphic novel. After five consultative workshops in Bangladesh (Research Initiatives Bangladesh) and the United Kingdom (UK; Centre for Women, Peace and Security, London School of Economics), we coproduced the guidelines, graphic novel, and animated film in collaboration with various stakeholders in Bangladesh and the UK, support and participation by the Ministry of Liberation War Affairs of the Government of Bangladesh and the UK's Foreign and Commonwealth Office's Preventing Sexual Violence in Conflict Initiative. The novel, film, and guidelines can be used by those who record testimonies of sexual violence in conflict (researchers, human rights activists, feminists, lawyers, filmmakers, photographers, journalists, and writers) and by future researchers and activists. It would also generate interest in sexual violence during conflict and enable sensitization of these issues among children (12 years old and above).

N. Mandolini: Interestingly, you have just said that the popularity of comics books in South Asia was among the reasons for selecting comics as the art form for your project. Are there other reasons why you opted for the graphic novel format and, more generally, for the medium of comics? What characteristics of the medium you thought could be beneficial for ethically portraying the challenges of testimony collection? Moreover, research has shown how graphic narratives, despite the infamous sexist history of the comics book in its mainstream formats, superhero comics and manga (Cocca, 2014; Nishiyama, 2016), have recently been used by feminist artists and artivists to represent gender violence and gender-related trauma in an effective, accessible and complex way (e.g., Chute, 2010; Clarke Gray & Wright, 2017; Fedtke, 2019; Mandolini, 2020). Do you think comics are well positioned as a medium, even concerning the representation of the specific sub-phenomenon of wartime rape?

N. Mookherjee: We were developing a set of guidelines in terms of what we

need to keep in mind before, during and after the testimonial process. As a result, it seemed apt to elaborate on the guidelines by visualising them. Visualising the guidelines animated them from being bullet-pointed to images which brought out the contexts of the guidelines even more. As a result, the intersectional subjectivity of the various interlocutors could also be brought out without it being explicitly mentioned, as it might have been the case when describing the contexts in a traditional text format. While words are able to generate textures of ethnography, images add another layer to bring out that texture. In fact, various images with or without text can bring out the "aurality of the images" (Mookherjee, 2022a). Various inanimate objects like the boots, the banging on the door, and the pole are resonant of the stories and sounds we collected and tried to reproduce in the graphic novel. Rather than linear narratives, the role of fragments within testimonies is also portrayed in terms of the context within which those fragments were articulated. Thus, on Page 24, when one of the survivors mentions that one day she was also in a storm like the one that is happening while the story unfolds, we could portray the ethnographic context of the oncoming cyclone, which is often common in Bangladesh. The subjectivity of the *birangonas* was also portrayed through the graphic novel, and Keya and I often had some interesting conversations on this matter. When drawing the sex worker Chaya Rani Dutta, for example, I wanted her to be sketched in the veil. Keya felt that, since she was a sex worker, she should not be portrayed in the veil. And yet, for me, Chaya, when meeting anyone, would not do so without the veil. Practising both Hindu and Muslim religions, she considered the red light district a place without religious boundaries. The life story of the *birangonas* thereby allowed us to bring out their various trajectories, and the presence of various objects/individuals around them also highlighted their intersectional positions. In the case of Ferdousy, it is her sculpture; for Moyna, it is the pole in front of her house; for Chaya, it is her veil and her daughter; for Shireen, it is the photographs in her place of work. On Page 18, we also allowed highlighting the everyday atmosphere of warmth (Mookherjee, 2022b) we established with the survivors and how that every day would also be interspersed with fragments of what happened to the survivors during the war. Above all, I think that the graphic novel allowed us to provide a depiction of the survivors and their contexts with words and images while being able to retain their anonymity and confidentiality.

N. Mandolini: Comics is, as scholars in comics semiotics have pointed out (Groensteen, 1999/2007, p. 9), a prevalently visual medium. Feminist scholars have widely discussed the problematic aspects underpinning the tradition from which our visual culture stems, which is sadly linked to the widespread practice of portraying women as objects of vision (e.g., Gribaldo & Zapperi, 2012, pp. 16–18; Mulvey, 1989, p. 19; Rose, 2005, p. 232). What are, in your opinion, the potentials and risks connected to visual representations of a delicate topic such as gendered violence? Have you assessed these potentials and risks before starting to work at *Birangona*?

N. Mookherjee: Visual representations can precisely recreate Orientalised

portrayals of the subject matter as well as reiterate hierarchies and problematic subjectivities which can contribute to existing stereotypes. The graphic novel provided a unique platform to interrogate those problematic representations and avoid sensationalisation in those portrayals. *The Spectral Wound* (Mookherjee, 2015) focused precisely on such problematic portrayals of the survivors through words and images. By ensuring we do not provide a graphic account of the gendered violence, by ensuring we do not sensationalise the narrative and indulge in pornography of violence, the assessment of the risks was intrinsic to the ethnographic findings of the book, which were then brought into the graphic novel.

N. Mandolini: In *Birangona*, you have clearly decided not to portray violence, and sexual violence in particular, graphically. Instead, you resort to substitutive symbols (such as the pole to which Labony's grandmother clings during her rape, which is presented as a recurring emblem of the sexual violence she suffered throughout the story). That is a strategy that many feminist artists working on gender violence have adopted, and it has to do, quite obviously, with the effort to avoid spectacularising gender violence. In the field of graphic novel production, this is a recognised technique (Mandolini, 2020, pp. 954–955; Remonato, 2013, pp. 379–380). *Birangona* also includes some explicit reflections on the issue of spectacularisation, which are particularly related to the good practice of avoiding reporting the women's story in sensationalist manners or insisting, during the interview process, on receiving graphic details from the interviewee. As you know, the medium of comics you have decided to use for *Birangona* is multimodal, which means it uses text and images. In your experience as the author of *Birangona*, is this peculiarity of the comics medium an advantage or a disadvantage to avoid spectacularisation?

N. Mookherjee: The graphic novel, with its use of text and image, is an important medium through which the spectacularisation of violence can be avoided. However, this depends on the research that underpins the visualisations of graphic novels. If we are not careful, as a medium, it can also reproduce Orientalised narratives/texts and strengthen existing stereotypes.

N. Mandolini: *Birangona* is composed not exclusively of comics. It also includes photographs or references to other types of existing visual artefacts (paintings and film posters) that accompany the fictional (though based on the real events collected during the ethnographic research) story of *Birangona*. The presence of this intermedial dimension can be interpreted as a kind of validation strategy. This technique has already been documented in comics and graphic novels where the photographic medium is referenced or used to provide a sort of "reality effect" or to increase the documentary value of the product (Pedri, 2015; Weber & Rall, 2017, p. 386). However, in order to portray survivors' true faces and stories, the cartooning technique is clearly the one that is used the most. Does this have to do with cartooning being considered less intrusive, thus aligning better with the anonymising policy the book clearly advocates? Did you use other strategies to manage this apparent paradox of, on the one

side, needing to show photographic documents to corroborate the realistic and truthful dimension of the narrative and, on the other side, wanting to protect survivors by hiding their true identities and features?

N. Mookherjee: The graphic novel is based on long-term ethnographic research, and that is what underpins the "realistic and truthful dimension of the narrative". I have not used the images of the women in my book, and neither are there any descriptions of them in the book. What the photographic images do bring out are descriptions in the book, which locate them within their varied intersectional contexts of that class, religion and other locations. The archival images were used as an aesthetic choice as I felt the juxtaposition of graphic images with archival texts interrupts the gaze of the reader. Also, I used these archival images as these did not fit the very strict art criteria of Duke University Press which published my book *The Spectral Wound* (Mookherjee, 2015). As a result, I found the graphic novel was an important format within which I could intersperse these images and juxtapose them with the cartoon images.

N. Mandolini: In *Birangona*, one of the protagonists, Labony, is conducting a school project for which she needs to interview her grandmother, a survivor of wartime rape. This is clearly, as the paratextual information located at the beginning of the graphic novel confirms, a fictional story that serves as a narrative framework for presenting the ethical guidelines. Why did you select a fictional story and not a true story as a framework? Is this related to the ethical issues that clearly arise when somebody wants to tell a true story based on the life of people who need to be respected (even if anonymised), or is it related to the fact that fictional stories allow more freedom to the author, thus permitting to convey specific messages in a more effective and prudent way?

N. Mookherjee: The story used in the graphic novel is a mixture of fiction and reality/ethnography and also draws from some films which have been produced on the *birangonas*. So it allowed me to ensure anonymity and highlight true accounts without identifying which bits are true and fictional while also having more freedom to add to the narrative drawn from different parts of my ethnography. All along, I try to highlight how the three Ss of wartime sexual violence — silence, shame and stigma — are to be understood through their political, historical and economic contexts and are not pre-determined consequences of wartime sexual violence.

N. Mandolini: It seems to me that one of the recurring thematic patterns in *Birangona* is the one about female genealogy, which is a renowned pattern when it comes to women's writing and feminist thought in general (e.g., Ezell, 2010; Muraro, 1991; Stone, 2004). While reading *Birangona*, the decision to create a transgenerational female story where women of different ages collaborate and contribute to the memorial process of testimony collection (either as collectors or as tellers) is clear. It is the same ethos of female intradependence and lineage that, at a narrative level, sustains the need to adopt the ethical guidelines for interviewers, to the point that the reader ends up associating a potential failure to respect the guidelines with the betrayal of the transgenerational respect

among women. Obviously, the transgenerational dimension is embodied by the relationship between the young protagonist, Labony, and her *birangona* grandmother. What I found particularly interesting is that Labony, who listens about the *birangonas* and slowly discloses her grandmother's story of rape, not only embodies this transgenerational exchange. She also embodies the tie that connects interviewers and interviewees, being the granddaughter of a survivor who tells her story and, at the same time, a young woman who expresses the desire to become a researcher working with oral history. I believe that this lack of rigid separation between the two parts, this decision to avoid the subject versus object type of relation, is precisely what reinforces the transgenerational link and, more importantly, the general feminist ethos of the publication. Would you mind talking a bit about this from your perspective as a feminist anthropologist and oral history scholar who is used to the practice of gathering testimonies?

N. Mookherjee: I like the idea of female *transdependency* you mention and how Labony embodies it through an intergenerational means to carry out this research in the future. And yes, the implementation of the guidelines is a form of respect towards this transgenerational and vicarious storytelling, which also highlights what I have recently referred to as "generative resilience" (Mookherjee, 2021a). The idea of generative resilience honours a different narration of sexual violence — one that emphasises women's abilities to continue to live with and pass on the experiences of sexual violence in ways that are uniquely relational. It is this contextualised understanding of resilience that needs to foster a nuanced understanding of the effects and transmissions of the experiences of rape as a weapon of war. Also, this intergenerational narrative is intertwined with the pain felt by Tanveer, the father, and for me, the scenes in the car and those where the characters cry and hold hands in silence are powerful in this formation of generative resilience and also de-objectify the survivor's experience, which is not only linked to women.

N. Mandolini: Which kind of responses have you received since the publication of *Birangona*? How do you think the graphic novel's creative means have actually facilitated the reception of the guidelines?

N. Mookherjee: The graphic novel and the animation film have been taken up by the UK government's Murad Code to develop an international protocol for those recording testimonies among survivors of wartime sexual violence. The Murad Code is based on the 2018 Yazidi survivor Nadia Murad and was launched in the United Nations in April 2022. Apart from the reaction of these various organisations linked to human rights, journalists have also adopted the graphic novel to bring changes in their organisational practices and perceptions and generate well-being for survivors. For me, the greatest response to the graphic novel and animation film came from the survivors, as these different formats have also enabled varied and easier dissemination of these texts. Reading the graphic novel, some survivors said:

> we cried and laughed on reading this book. It should be read and
> seen by all children and their parents. By reading this book, children

will not question the war again. No one will question who fought, and no one will ever give *khota*/scorn to *birangonas*. Along with children, their parents would read, their mothers would read, and they would get to know about the war. All our stories are here in this book, and I want this book to be in every school in Bangladesh so that all children know about us.

(rural birangonas and their children, personal communication, May 2020)

A sexual violence survivor (personal communication, May 2020) belonging to the Denis Mukwege Foundation (2018 Nobel Peace Prize winner with Nadia Murad) said:

the format of this approach is so inspiring, educative, with a pinch of compassion in the telling of the shared experiences of the *birangonas*. As a "survivor" myself, I still cannot claim and own that word upon myself. During the Luxembourg retreat, we had a session on what do we address ourselves. Globally in the network, the Colombian and Guatemalan women preferred to use and be addressed as victims, while the majority of the women related to the word survivors. But for a government to decide to honour their victims by naming them *birangonas* right there from the start, stigma is addressed effectively and beautifully, even though there is still a lot to be done in our societies today, even after such recognition.

The possibility of having this text as a public-facing scholarship and how it intersected with various public discourses was confirmed to me by my friend, Dr Meghna Guhathakurta. We were partnering with Meghna's organisation, Research Initiatives Bangladesh, for the production and circulation of the graphic novel, and Meghna's father was also killed by the Pakistani army during the war. After the graphic novel was completed, Meghna said she was carrying the graphic novel in her bag, reading it on and off, and she said she was welling up on reading it. Meghna's response made it clear that the graphic novel would also resonate among many who had lost their loved ones in 1971.

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Biographical Notes

Nicoletta Mandolini is a Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia junior researcher at the Communication and Society Research Centre at the University

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