
Elora Halim Chowdhury, Devin G. Atallah-Gutierrez

Human Rights Quarterly, Volume 34, Number 4, November 2012, pp. 1201-1211 (Review)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: 10.1353/hrq.2012.0070

For additional information about this article

https://muse.jhu.edu/article/489377
punishing those who commit CAH for reasons of accountability, redress, and human solidarity.63

Caroline Davidson*
Assistant Professor of Law
Willamette University College of Law

* Caroline Davidson is Assistant Professor of Law at Willamette University College of Law. Previously, she prosecuted alleged war criminals at the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia and the State Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina.


In Yasmin Saikia’s groundbreaking and provocative book, Women, War, and the Making of Bangladesh: Remembering 1971, she challenges a number of cherished and inherited “truths” regarding the Bangladesh War of Liberation in 1971. The book is groundbreaking because it joins a small number of scholarly publications for a global audience that attempts to shed light on a forgotten conflict in the history of modern South Asia and one that prioritizes women’s narratives as the primary vehicle for reconstructing this forgotten history.1 It is also provocative because it debunks a number of national myths that have shaped the consciousness of the post-1971 nation of Bangladesh. Saikia rightly points out that there is an abundance of literature generated in Bangladesh about the war. Published as memoirs, novels, district level reports, and accounts of war crimes, however, together these documents have re-membered the war as a triumphant narrative of masculine liberation. Women’s wartime experiences and struggles in these narratives have not only been made invisible but also reduced to “the private sphere and are dealt with as private matters by the victims’ families [Saikia refers here to the victims’ families] and often solely by the victim who hides in shame.”2

Countering such reductive renditions, Saikia astutely posits that since the partition of the Indian Sub-continent in 1947, 1971 was the only instance when the three nations of India, Pakistan, and the erstwhile East Pakistan or Bangladesh encountered one another. Considered a civil war between the two wings of Pakistan, it was thus also an international war involving India in multiple ways even preceding and beyond its much trumped up “intervention” in the last two weeks leading to the surrender of Pakistan army on 16 December. Moreover, an internal war was fought between the Bengalis and the Urdu-speaking Biharis residing in Bangladesh and whose allegiance was to Pakistan. Lastly, a gender war was unleashed against the vulnerable women, both Bengali and Bihari of this region. Hence, taking issue with the branding of 1971 as liberation or even heroic, Saikia urges readers to delve deeper in order to “develop an ethical memory,” which

63. Bassiouni, Crimes Against Humanity: Historical Evolution, supra note 2, preface.


she hopes will “initiate multiple tellings of 1971.”\textsuperscript{3} This in turn she believes will “cultivate a site for the divided people of South Asia, in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, to contemplate a different self and Other relationship.”\textsuperscript{4}

Noteworthy here is Saikia’s attempt to broaden the scope of reconstructing and remembering 1971 beyond the borders of Bangladesh and to reestablish the intertwined history of the region. However, unraveling this complex history will dislodge, Saikia renders, a number of perceived truths—a point to which I will return in the concluding section of this essay. For Saikia, these “truths” include the misguided idea that Bangladeshis willfully hold on to: the notion that there were clear-cut enemies and victims (namely Pakistanis versus Bengalis), which suggests Pakistan was the sole colonial power oppressing them pre-1971;\textsuperscript{5} and the claim to genocide, which Saikia defines as “a cold and rational plan and not irrational, random acts of killing.”\textsuperscript{6}

Contrary to this definition of genocide, her findings determine that “No single group had a monopoly on committing violence, nor did one single group control the production of death in East Pakistan.”\textsuperscript{7} Consequently, since the many acts of internal violence have not been confronted in Bangladesh, Saikia is suspicious of a Truth and Reconciliation process or a war crime tribunal. She asks, “Who will try the criminals? And who has the authority to do so?”\textsuperscript{8} She notes in the current climate of distrust and vengefulness between the governments of Bangladesh and Pakistan, these processes could not be properly administered, and most importantly would not solve the uncontended with problems of women who are yet to be recognized as political actors. After all, as Saikia poignantly asks, “What kind of memory inhabits the site of pain that has never been resolved or visited?”\textsuperscript{9}

Instead, Saikia encourages turning to local cultural and religious principles for finding an alternative solution for redressing the erasure of women’s histories, striving for healing across communities and nations, and settling unresolved grievances. Drawing on the philosophical traditions of the thirteenth century Turkish poet Maulana Jalaluddin Rumi, the nineteenth century Bengali mystic Lalon Fakir, as well as the Islamic religio-cultural principles of insāniyat (humanity), Saikia develops a premise for fostering forgiveness, justice, and reconciliation across communities of the embattled South Asian nations. She is encouraged by such an alternative because in conversations with Saikia survivors of 1971, she noted the loss of humanity in violence and the ethical obligations of humankind to act responsibly in order to sustain humane societies. The foundations of such a humane society, Saikia believes, can be found in the Islamic understandings of rights and responsibilities, or huquq-al-ibaḍ. According to this principle, “The obligation to admit and act on the realization of the transgression of a women’s haqq (right) to her human dignity is a perpetrator’s responsibility,
and the reciprocation of forgiveness is the right of the victim.”10 The process of invoking the right and implementing it requires both parties—victim and perpetrator—to engage together. Only the victim can pardon the perpetrator, and in the event of her death her relatives are bestowed with that responsibility. The acts of admission, recognition, and appealing for forgiveness have to be undertaken by the individual perpetrator (not the community, nor nation). “The victim is encouraged to forgive the repentant rather than seek retribution for the well-being of peace and harmony in the community and to help the perpetrator recover their humanity and fulfill their obligation of upholding the principle of *huquq-al-ibaad.*”11 Saikia believes neither civil society organizations nor the state can grant the kind of apology or justice that could be meted out by individual participation. For only the individual process can ensure the engagement of “the body of women as a crucial text, a site of the abuse of men’s power, and a source of testimony about the war of 1971.”12 This process is a recognition of women’s voice, struggle, and agency. Saikia reminds us, however, that the narrative testimony of the perpetrators would have to be acknowledged by the state and the government, which presumably then requires a simultaneous admission of the atrocities by these higher bodies.

The book makes a valuable attempt at broadening the discussion of women’s rights to that of justice for women, arguably a framework more encompassing in ensuring a meaningful response to communities that a state or international law centered rights based system of jurisprudence may not effectively reach. Nevertheless, a number of questions arise as to whether a notion of justice based on Islamic religio-cultural traditions of the Sub-continent would adequately redress the pain and suffering of women across communities. First, it is widely known that the Hindu-minority community in East Pakistan was targeted with particular ferocity in 1971 by West Pakistani forces. Second, is there a contradiction and even risk in evoking Islamic justice given Bangladesh was founded on secular principles promoting respectful and pluralistic co-existence across religious communities? Third, what would be the ramifications of resorting to an Islamic premise for reconciliation in the current political moment where religious extremism is a force to contend with, a force that frequently harkens to Islamic law as the ground for an authentic Islamic state in Bangladesh? One might also add that these forces are not particularly known for their anti-patriarchal stance. Admittedly, Saikia makes a distinction between implementing a codified Sharia versus the more fluid lived religio-cultural principles she evokes, but the unanticipated slippage between the two cannot be ascertained. Fourth, given the geographic distance between Pakistan and Bangladesh, how would these individual transactions of pardon take place? Finally, are there actual on the ground examples of such transactions of *wali al-dam* (the process of pardon) that the author could point to in South Asia, Pakistan, or Bangladesh in particular that could serve as a model for her framework for justice? Curiously, in Saikia’s book, the historical overview of events between 1947 and 1971, and particularly leading up to the war appears to be Pakistan-centric.

10. *Id.* at 102.
11. *Id.*
12. *Id.* at 103.
That is, even if the seat of power then resided in then-West Pakistan, we are not provided with a nuanced Bengali Muslim historical or political discourse of the same period. Arguably, lived traditions of Islam varied in these two wings, separated by a thousand miles of Indian territory, language, and culture, and therefore developing a shared notion of insâniyat based on local religious and cultural heritage might also differ. Also, what of questions of compensation and reparation: both at the individual, as well as at the state level? What would be the relationship between individual and state level pardons? Could we imagine through this framework political and social justice for victims as well as persecuted communities like the Hindus, the Biharis, and the nation of Bangladesh, as well as its women citizens?

A remarkable feature of Saikia’s book is that she does not stop at merely excavating stories of women victims in 1971 but she strives to understand how men, as perpetrators, are transformed by the violence of war. During a year-long stay in Pakistan, she interviewed 123 military personnel of different ranks. In these interviews with Pakistani soldiers, Saikia discovered “shared insâniyat” among them. This was found in the process of committing violence yet encountering and recognizing the humanity of their victims: “In becoming aware of their victims’ human emotions perpetrators recognized that what is within them is also within their enemies.”

She found these men irreversibly damaged by the institutionalized violence of the Pakistan army, and the conditioned acts of violence they perpetrated on the “Other.” While not exonerating the men for war time atrocities, nevertheless Saikia believes it is the responsibility of researchers to “probe perpetrators’ obligations learned from lived experience.” She finds, “Being haunted by the memory of the Other and telling their crimes, these men deliver a justice to their victim that no tribunal, state, or court of law can deliver, and in that same gesture they make us aware that their existence as a human rests on the Other.”

While I commend the author for her careful analysis of militarism as a system and the cultivation of hate within it that gradually dehumanizes the Other and makes violence banal, in the absence of an official state-level admission of guilt or an organized movement by military personnel in Pakistan to challenge their own government’s silence around the 1971 persecutions, I find such compassionate humanization of the war machinery dubious. I fully agree that demystifying war by humanizing its actors—both victims and perpetrators—is both necessary and urgent in the violent world we have inherited. Nevertheless, the quick granting of humanity to perpetrators, who found their own humanity in the abjection of the victims who lost humanity, seems to de-center that objection as well as the question of individual responsibility and choice in the enactment of violence. Is this transaction of loss and discovery of humanity morally equivalent or reciprocal? Is an organized military strike equally damaging and culpable as a resistance/guerilla movement? How should we theorize perpetrators’ individual agency and choice within systems of oppression? Is Bengali nationalism completely suspect, corrupt and unworthy of reflexive engagement?

13. Id. at 216.
14. Id. at 217.
15. Id. at 237.
In 1971, the militarization of men as fighters and the harming of women seemed to unfold together. This raises a broader question about the widespread phenomena of violence against women during war and within militarized contexts, speaking to the intersections of patriarchy, sexual violence, colonialism, militarism, and nationalism. Violence against women in such layered contexts has been linked by feminist scholars to the myriad ways gender ideologies and constructions are manipulated within militarized regimes. A careful analysis of multiple masculinities and femininities would complicate Saikia’s assertion that no categorical enemy could be identified in the 1971 devastations. What kinds of knowledge would we have gained if in addition to the Pakistani soldiers, Saikia had also interviewed Bengali freedom fighters? If the mythical narrative in Bangladesh about them is that of the heroic martyr, what would thoughtful conversations with them reveal about insāniyat in the intersection of resistance/oppression? Here again, I am curious to understand more fully the ramifications of plural masculinities, dominant or subordinate, at work in wartime violence. How do we carry out a responsible inquiry into processes of marginalization of, and violence against and by men who are differently raced, cultured, and nationed during war?

Some of the insights from the postscript of Saikia’s investigations with male ex-soldiers may shed light on this question, such as the interpretations of interviews with Amin and Alam regarding the impact of military codes and discipline. Another soldier named Muhammad also talked about the discipline of being a soldier and the ways these codes of conduct both guided human reaction during situations of experiencing mayhem, yet also fueled the chaos. Colonel Ali’s quotes speak volumes about impacts of the machinery of the state and one’s location within or outside territories delineating the parameters of morality. Being highly disciplined as a warrior and yet highly undisciplined in the chaos and mayhem of war is paradoxical and worth discussion. How might relationships that individuals and groups have with belief systems and moral codes change and transform based on the landscapes of gender, war, and the complex interplay of social fabrics behind aggressive acts?

Methodologically, Saikia’s book deploys innovative tools in order to write a “polyversal” people’s history with the objectives of self-transformation and realization of human interconnectedness with the Other. She embarked not only in an academic exercise of knowledge production but a historical study that can be engaged with “as a character in the national plot with strategic use.” The scope of the book intends its use in political justice, healing, and a potential resolution to a historic conflict. It is meant to aid in the process of decolonization, and in its emphasis on women’s perspectives to redress violence, erasure and forgetting, Saikia aims to suture painful ruptures in individual and collective memories. In documenting and preserving oral histories of survivors, she underscores the value of personal accounts in providing an “imaginative access” to a “devastating moment.” Women’s words cannot be dismissed as sentimentality but are critical sources for producing a composite

16. *Id.* at 220–22.
17. *Id.* at 233.
18. *Id.* at 228–29.
19. *Id.* at 8.
20. *Id.* at 82, quoting SUSAN BRISON, AFTERMATH: VIOLENCE AND THE REMAKING OF SELF (2002).
history based on the shared heritage of the region.

As a researcher, Saikia feels responsible to convey the stories of the women who trusted her and found in her a rare and unusual ally. Encountering the neglected, decrepit archives and recalcitrant state agents who preserve these documents, she astutely notes that the silencing of marginal narratives is political and willful. It is all the more important therefore to listen to the survivors’ stories in an attempt to redress the “epistemic silence” with regards to women’s experience in 1971. Opening that door allows for collective reflection and perhaps acknowledgment that in the war there was no categorical perpetrator/victim that separated the two groups on either side of West and East Pakistan. And that abject victims of the war—namely women—were subject to violence by silence, speech, and action even post-independence by their own families, communities, and government. That admission would be the starting point of a decolonized awareness of self and Other.

The impact of Saikia’s research endeavor on the women interviewed is briefly discussed at different points in the book. The author frames memories of violence as nebulous, clouded by a confluence of factors. These factors, however, are not explored within existing research on processes of recollecting sexual trauma, which could be an added strength to this project. Remembering sexual trauma can be a multifaceted journey, impacted by diverse psycho-social, relational, and situational concerns. The author notes that the word “rape” rarely surfaced but rather “abduction, marriage, torture, visit,” and other terms were used when describing experiences of sexual violence.21 The position of being asked to tell the unthinkable and express, with words, experiences that are horrifically traumatic and may feel completely nameless, is complicated to say the least. An individual’s access to these memories is another layered issue. In some circumstances, is it possible that a researcher could have a unique type of control and authority over these memories when compared to a survivor? Once surfaced and constructed into words, the impact of telling their experiences to the author, in the end, remains unclear. The responsibility of the researcher is also an ethical issue raised by Saikia but not explored in detail, nor compared with other research projects working from similar values and motivations. The methodological issues pertaining to this warrant further discussion.

For the reader, the impact of the women’s experiences and author’s interpretations is unmistakable and undeniable. Saikia provides detailed accounts of people’s lives across chapters dedicated to victims’ memories, women’s services, and women’s war that at times are horrifying and tragic, while at other moments beautiful and inspiring, together urging us to reflect on the ways in which a woman’s personal suffering of violence transforms and interacts with her inner and outer worlds. This section of the book is a beating heart. It is alive as readers are invited by the author to hear the women’s stories and partake in the transformative interaction of human testimony. The author provides contextualization before each narrative, which is useful and supports the understanding of the researcher’s relationship with the individual and interpretive suggestions. It would be insightful to interpret some

21. *Id.* at 91.
of the women’s stories as victims intertwined with those who worked in support and development as well as in military training. The way the author splits up the women’s accounts, where some individuals speak of victimization while others about community service and yet others about combat training, in some ways compartmentalized the stories. For some, even as war puts them in grave danger, it also opened up opportunities where gender norms shifted and allowed for greater participation in society. To what extent do victimization and victimhood obscure the complexity of women’s lives? Is it possible to think that in some specific sites and historical moments, victims are simply victims and perpetrators are simply perpetrators? What are the ethical obligations for researchers with regard to these narratives and accounts? In the present theoretical moment, in which “agency” is continually sought for, what might we be losing sight of? Is Saikia equating speech and voice with agency? The term that Bangladeshi government used for rape victims, Birangona, means brave women/war hero. Bravery and heroism are concepts that refer to agency and free choice, which are almost opposite of the experience of the complete helplessness and subordination that rape victims experienced. Adding to the community’s cruel attitudes towards these women, how should we think about this agency/victim dichotomy?

Two critical questions that Saikia invokes in her readers are: Who gets to make meaning about women’s experiences of sexual violence in public spheres? Who benefits from these meanings? There appears to be an ongoing, and unresolved contradiction between the elevation of rape in state discourse (assigning women the honorific, Birangona) and nationalist imagery as the ultimate sacrifice for liberation, and, on the other hand, the lived experiences of repudiation and marginalization of raped women. On a discursive level, the raped body is permitted to represent the nation and emancipation, but on other levels (material and cultural), the raped woman embodies dishonor and contamination. The collective nameless bodies are enshrined in state nationalist discourse, yet the personalized bodies are marginalized. Nayanika Mookherjee argues that only when women have been “designated” certain agency the polluted body is purified (generally in an act of sacrifice for men). Thus the danger in discourses on women and nationalism: it seems to elevate women’s position in the nation, yet essentializes women and femininity to such a degree as to bind them in specific roles. Framed with-in such logic, the raped body fulfills a middle-class nationalist project and aesthetics according to Mookherjee. In this regard, Mookherjee’s work probes the question of how the “transgressed” nation, as opposed to the transgressor, during its process of reconstruction and consolidation, deploys and reworks nationalist discourses also based on exclusion. Both the rapists and the Bangladeshi state try to establish their power by penetrating the female body through avenues such as abortion clinics.

This point leads me to further probe the use of “silence” with regard to rape in nationalist discourses. On one hand as Saikia argues that raped bodies were silenced because they represented shame as well as the potential exposure of the enemy within, and Mookherjee argues

they did not fit into the middle-class aesthetics of national reconstruction. On the other hand, however, there was considerable discursive production around rape in nationalist and state discourses, literature and film. In these accounts, there was everything but silence. It could be debated that “women’s voices” were silent, but discourses around rape abounded. The agency of the women was designated and prescribed by the nation-state. Raped women are agentic when they fulfill certain nationalist/middle-class desires. Agency in this representation is equated with voice. Could we however expand our understanding of it to willing death, suicide, crime, and silence? How would we imagine the agentic silences in these forms?

Greater attention to the ways women make meaning of their own experiences, resources, and dreams, particularly as connected to intergenerational legacies and articulations of needs and hopes for the future, would lend stronger voice to them. How would we imagine each woman’s testimony as indicative of the shifting frontlines of war? Viewing the women interviewed as experts and witnesses on their own lives and needs, and listening to the ways they would see, and perhaps make recommendations for changes in their communities and broader policy could be a powerful resource. What are some implications of this book for direct communities involved in this project? And the larger quest for political justice in Bangladesh? How could the researcher have gained more information about specific pathways for promoting improved opportunities for having needs met, including access to healing, safety, and security for the women interviewed, their children and others impacted by war? How could Saikia have systematically integrated participation in movements towards improving accountability into the design and methodology of her project? Does Saikia’s project contribute to existing understandings and ongoing partnerships on the ground with communities—particularly women’s and feminist ones—already working toward state accountability for women participants in 1971? What is the author’s and readers’ responsibility in advocating and acting on policy implications? Such political implications would arguably determine whether a project is about women’s experiences in war vis-à-vis a feminist project for transformation.

Also, one cannot help but ask, as the War Crime Tribunal is currently underway in Bangladesh, what are the policy implications of this research in relation to both the acknowledgment of genocide (which Saikia questions as truth) and honest recognition of diverse women’s victimization? Would questioning whether one can call what happened in 1971 a genocide (like Saikia does) detract from this and future processes? The WCT is supported by wide swathe of Bangladeshis who might find Saikia’s position on genocide dubious. I would argue ample documentation exists that persuasively demonstrates that under international law and United Nations Convention, what occurred in 1971, the systematic persecution of Bengalis by West Pakistan army, constitutes genocide.23 On the other hand, preliminary accounts of WCT tend to support Saikia’s concern about women’s continued exclusion from political processes.

Amani El Jack argues that war-time violence ought not be seen as a completely separate stage than pre or post war times of so-called peace and reconstruction.24 Instead, conceptually, they

form a continuum of conflict. Firdousi Priyabhasini’s narrative in Saikia’s book is a testament to this as she traces the ways gendered violence and oppression are structural and compounded by war and poverty. The plight of the Bihari community illuminates accumulated oppression across generations. In order to imagine sound resolution to gender based violence during war, El Jack reminds us,

What constitutes peace from a feminist perspective may differ from mainstream views because for many, particularly women, peace does not simply mean the end of the armed conflict, but a time to address the structural power imbalances that caused the conflict in the first place. What is required, then, is a more nuanced interpretation of these stages, where interventions that address gender inequality in armed conflict reflect the fact that events occur simultaneously and stages overlap.25

Saikia’s book I hope will aid in opening up that space in South Asia to reflect honestly about the continuum of women’s oppression across time and space and the entanglement of responsibility across communities and nations. Like the encounter in 1971 itself, which the author rightly described as a three-nation confrontation, the solution must also be regional, trans-historical and collectively approached.

Postscript by Devin G. Atallah-Gutierrez

After reading Yasmin Saikia’s words, standing directly across from her mural of human narratives, I was left with defeat, emptiness, and the taste of an unfinished poem. Without a doubt, the testimonies throughout this book touched me on so many levels: as a multicultural Palestinian Arab and Latino, and as a racially White American male, and as a community worker and psychotherapist supporting youth and their families struggling with severe and multifaceted challenges living in some of Boston’s most marginalized urban communities of color. When Saikia narrated women’s journeys of suffering and survival in Bangladesh, I heard a piercing echo, perhaps resounding to me from the words of that poem that my Palestinian aunt narrated to me last summer when we were together in Bethlehem, enjoying bitter coffee beneath the shadow of the state of Israel’s Wall. When reading Saikia’s book, I could hear the machine gun fire shot down by sniper towers and apache helicopters raining from a sky that was blue yet occupied. I remembered how a woman near my aunt’s house in a neighboring refugee camp was shot dead in the privacy of her home by Israeli soldiers raiding the neighborhood, and yet, because of the military curfew, the victim’s family could not remove her dead body from the confines of their housing unit for three days. No doubt, reading Women, War, and the Making of Bangladesh: Remembering 1971, I remembered the toll of the absence of the power to protect oneself and those you love most, and at times, the denial to protect even the dead, to bury bodies and memories for the opening of possibilities to work on recovery, reconciliation, and reconstruction; rather than on continuing to be forced to live in death, domination, and even obliteration. The stories shared in Saikia’s book deepened my compassion and imagination of the depth of struggle when stripped naked and facing nearly complete defenselessness. As an adult survivor of a sexual abuse incident when I was a child, despite fighting flashbacks that emerged for me when reading Saikia’s book, I remembered

25. Id. at 10.
my own strength when defending and protecting my tenderness and dignity against the unfolding and ongoing attack on my humanity, a war carved out in the shapes and silences of my abused body, memory, and skin. As a man, I reflected on the horror of gender inequities and the importance of standing alongside women as allies in movements to end all forms of gender-based violence. And in prayer for the many women who were killed in Bangladesh during the war of 1971, I remembered how their voices are never heard, but only felt, like the way I remember my American godmother—my beloved Aunt Sabrina, who I listen to never by hearing her words but by feeling her presence. When I was a small child, Sabrina’s life, body, and our family as a whole, was destroyed by two men who captured, sexually tortured, raped, and brutally murdered her in acts of ineffable violence. As I listened to the women in Saikia’s book, Sabrina read it with me. We reflected and strengthened together. Yes, remembering 1971, I wrote this poem remembering her.

I am me in Bangladesh
brutality besieges me
as I await my death

hunting with arrows and ten thousand tears
you bruise my branches
devour my sap
destroy the mango tree
and her fruit born from the seed of respect

perhaps you hunger for my insāniyat
provoked by your emptiness
of honor
washed away in monsoons of war
hidden by the shadows of clouds
that you call manhood and power

you go ahead with no direction
or consent
feasting on my roots
beginning with your fingers
reaching deep
beneath my daughter’s grave

laying still
I am me in my daily death
sinking silently into the mud
into the murkiness of burden, rain, and earth
until my lungs are filled with henna
so that I may paint
the hand of Fatima
with my voice

so that I may awaken with pride and remember
that I never hurt my mother

you are nothing but a wasp
passing through my blood

I am me
water lilies
a woman
in a pond you call nation

I am me in Bangladesh

Elora Halim Chowdhury with Devin G. Atallah-Gutierrez*
University of Massachusetts Boston

* Elora Halim Chowdhury is Associate Professor in the Department of Women’s Studies at the University of Massachusetts Boston. Her research and teaching interests include transnational feminisms, critical development studies, gender violence and human rights advocacy. She is the author of Transnationalism Reversed: Women Organizing Against Gendered Violence in Bangladesh (SUNY Press 2011).

** Devin G. Atallah-Gutierrez lives in Boston, Massachusetts, with his partner and two children and provides home-visiting and community-based psychotherapy services for youth and families living in marginalized communities in Boston. Devin is also a doctoral candidate in the University of Massachusetts at Boston, Clinical Psychology Program, currently working on his dissertation research exploring resilience and resistance journeys with Palestinian refugee families living in territories occupied by Israel, facing intergenerational legacies and ongoing adverse ecologies of war and political repression.
The author would like to acknowledge the students in her “Feminisms and Islam” course at the Graduate Consortium for Women’s Studies at MIT, Cambridge in Spring 2012 for their deeply thoughtful insights, which sparked many of the ideas in this review. In particular, she appreciates Devin G. Atallah-Gutierrez’s heartfelt reflections on the manifold consequences of war on women in disparate yet connected human ecologies. His poem and narrative in the postscript to this essay is a poignant reminder of Yasmin Saikia’s meditations on the transcendent implications of insanīyat. The author also thanks Bina D’Costa for her valuable comments on the manuscript.


Colleen Murphy provides us with an original, nuanced, well-written, and analytically incisive diagnosis of how political relationships fail and what it takes to fix them. This is an important and timely book furthering both our understanding of what counts, normatively, as a healthy polity and what can be done practically to nurse war-torn communities back to health. Murphy argues that three aspects of political relationships are damaged during conflict and under repressive government: the idea of the rule of law, political trust, and citizens’ basic capabilities. The erosion of each category harms our ability to act as moral agents and to base our relationships with fellow citizens on reciprocal exchange. Hence, the creation (occasionally recreation) of relationships expressing these values is the goal of reconciliation processes. The three categories are closely related and are mutually reinforcing in the process of repairing such relationships.

The analysis of the first category draws on Lon Fuller’s famous account of the rule of law. Murphy provides us here with an insightful analysis of how violations of the ideal, by undermining the stability and predictability of the public sphere, breed resentment and make it impossible for people to practically plan out their lives.

Following Karen Jones, Murphy describes trust as “an attitude of optimism with respect to the competence and will of the trustee.” She explains the importance of “trust responsiveness”—the propensity of a trustee to act as trusted because she is trusted. Political trust in fellow citizens consists in optimism about their ability to follow rules, play fair, harbor no ill will to other citizens, and remain loyal to a legitimate political order. Trusting officials requires optimism about their ability to identify the appropriate grounds for official action, confidence that they do not unfairly favor one part of the community, and faith that they are willing to abide by rules restricting their power.

A community in which default trust and trust responsiveness exist between the citizens and between the citizens and officials is one in which mutual respect and reciprocity are possible.

In her discussion of political capabilities, Murphy focuses on four potentialities that are undermined by political conflict: the capability of being respected, of being recognized as a member of a political community, of being an effective participant in the economic, social, and political life of the community, and of possessing the capabilities necessary for surviving and avoiding poverty. All of these are instrumental for autonomy.