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**Ghosting Men: Supernatural Narratives of Resilience
against Gender-based Violence Among Ethnic Minorities
in Chattogram Hill Tracts, Bangladesh**

Master's Thesis

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Introduction

During my one-year ethnography in Chattogram Hill Tracts (CHT) of Bangladesh, where roughly fifty ethnic minorities live, I have studied indigenous belief systems, spotlighting on women's ghostlore among the Chakma, the Marma, and the Tripura peoples. Trekking miles through the perilous hills I have attempted to collect, document, understand, interpret, and analyse the creation, usage, and impacts of ghosts that are relevant to women. There, women have always been victims of rape, murder, and culturally sanctioned discrimination in every aspect of life; surviving with strong determination to feed their children, cultivate the almost infertile lands, to conform, and push through the everyday obstacles. Throughout the process of analytical writing of this thesis process I came across a pattern of women's coping mechanisms and resilience fuelled by religious and spiritual beliefs and practices against the gender-based discrimination and structural violence. I decided to work specifically on supernatural folklore related to women, because I could hear women's voices in the ghost narratives which, interestingly enough, roomed in different dimensions than the values and beliefs that accommodate women's oppression. My research focuses on ghosts of women and for women in the Hill Tracts of Chattogram; how they are shaped by the stories and presences of personal and collective trauma, and how they sculpt women's position in public and personal spaces. Drawing on interviews with around a hundred women and men, I argue that women's ghostlore creates multiple ambiguous and layered realities as a form of resilience against multi-layered gender-based expressions of violence. The results of this thesis show how supernatural narratives – ghostlore – help enforce norms as well as enable women to protect themselves from gender-specific violence and oppression.

The thesis consists of five chapters. The first chapter in four sub-chapters, draws overview of the fieldwork and research procedure. The second chapter discusses the sociopolitical, cultural, religious, gender etc. context of the ethnic minority groups of Bangladesh, in five sub-chapters. The third chapter in four sub-chapters, analyses the supernatural narratives drawing upon the interviews. The fourth chapter in two sub-chapters, talks about how collective guilt and trauma work, and how women from their positions can regulate the society by reclaiming their power in covert ways. The fifth and final chapter looks into the narratives through the lens of legend theory and the importance of the narratives being legends.

1 Research background

1.1 *Field setting and fieldwork*

I have conducted my ethnographic fieldwork during the whole year of 2018, and parts of the data collection process has been conducted through the years of 2020, 2021, and 2022 using online tools. This research follows a mixed method approach where passive and participatory observation, primary data collection as in interviews and finally secondary data as in literature review. I have interviewed in depth, keeping my questions minimal and open-ended and the question patterns have been unstructured. People of different ages, from the ethnic groups Tanchangya, Bawm, Lusai, Pankhua and Mro, and some Bengalis residing in Chattogram Hill Tracts have been interviewed besides the main focus groups that are Chakma, Marma, and Tripura. Most of the popular ghostlore or folklore regarding ghosts have come into light through the journey. Narratives have been different from person to person in case of individual and communal haunting experiences nevertheless I have picked the most common ones and incorporated in my research in order to further talk about the topic matter.

I have visited the field with mainly local vehicles exactly like the local peoples travel and I have maintained a very simple appearance during my work. I have visited all the places from the government guest houses I stayed in, and the houses of my relatives in the hill tracts. I have conducted one-to-one in-depth interviews and focus group discussions in the villages I have visited. I have visited both urban and rural areas to find comparisons and also have visited the areas as per the local guides have suggested as ‘most haunted’ areas. The process of finding local informants was purposeful snowballing sampling method where I have found new informants from the suggestions given by the existing informants. Since my sampling process has been disorganised, in order to make sure I have not minimised my work in a specific area and left out the rest, I have tried to go to almost all the sub-districts of the three hill districts of Chattogram, grabbing the map. Apart from the scattered and most of the times semi-planned focus group discussions, I have interviewed (in-depth) around two hundred and fifty people including *baidyas* (local healers) from these places whose names and sensitive personal information I chose not to disclose mostly as per request.

1.2 *Objective of research*

The key objective of this dissertation has been to examine the narratives of supernatural folklore of women while analysing them under the lenses of the folkloristic genre of legend. Throughout the research I have attempted to look into the cultural and sociopolitical situation of the indigenous peoples residing in the Chattogram Hill Tracts, their ethnospiritual perspectives on ghosts, possession, and transgressive relationships with supernatural entities, othering of women on the scale of beauty, eroticisation and objectification of them and how they reclaim their position through repurposing of such objectification, women's position in altering the society, collective trauma and guilt, and finally, believing in the legends of the hills that are functional in changing the society.

Throughout the research I have referred to indigenous knowledge and worldview that is embedded in the culture, traditions, practices of the ethnic minority communities. Their indigenous knowledge is stemmed from the tools, techniques, skills, and ideas for leading life in the hills which is also passed from generation to generation through oral transmission. The context of the supernatural in the form of possessions and hauntings become the background through which knowledge that is specifically connected with women's experience is created and produced. This kind of knowledge is particular to the cultural setting and place from where these narratives have been collected.

1.3 *Theoretical framework and relevance of literature*

During the process of data analysis, besides the lack of relevant literature in the context, I have also noticed a wide scope of categorising folklore of the hills in general in different folkloristic genres, analysing them from multiple theoretical angles on different levels, and producing new theories for specific context like this particular one. In my discussion of the narratives, I have chosen to categorise women's supernatural folklore under the genre of legends the teleology of which may need to undergo further and much serious scrutiny.

The discussion consists of understanding the legends from different angles of legend theory, their sociopolitical and cultural significance, and most importantly their contribution in small to big scale changes in women's positions in private and public space. I attempt to argue that there is a natural categorisation process of folk elements as they are mostly transmitted through

the oral medium. To elaborate, as an event takes place, it is the people who naturally decide how to articulate the narrative of the event during transmission, which is the reason some stories become humorous, some become rumours, some fall into other genres etc. Most of the supernatural folklore that has been collected through this research are connected to some real events or situations by the narrators themselves, besides my analyses. There are good reasons why these supernatural narratives have become and will continue to be legends. This natural categorisation has meaning to it, messages are being conveyed by such choice being made among the people themselves. I elaborate the necessity, significance, and contribution of the narratives being legends in the chapter where I discuss the narratives. I look at the stories as legends, as a tool that convey some messages, in the manner that 'works'. This is analysed in chapter 5.

The relevant literature that has been incorporated in order to back up my arguments may have strong influence of Feminist theories. There has been a scarcity of relevant literature and past research seeing women's power, space, and conditions with their supernatural folklore, leaving me in a more difficult position to come up with a theoretical framework that involves seeing such folklore through other lenses including Feminist approaches. Since I believe that there are multiple ways to see and analyse the multidimensional supernatural folklore of women relating to their conditions, besides Feminist theories as a viewpoint to discuss these narratives, I invite more perspectives, I leave the discussion open as the interpretations are derived from narratives, as well as recognise the feminist inclination of the narratives.

1.4 Limitation and scope

During the process of my one-year ethnography in the hills, I have interviewed around a hundred of people solely focusing on women's supernatural folklore, and there have been multiple factors limiting my access and communication. The risks due to political turmoil, militarisation, and related barricades in the hill areas have been the most difficult limitation to overcome which I partially could as a gift of the time I took to build rapport. Language barrier has been another personal limitation, although I could partially speak and understand Chakma, I needed to take assistance from key informants for interpretation of Marma and Kakbarak (Tripura) languages. Reaching the busy and the confined women have been difficult as well. Furthermore, the data cannot be validated due to its nature of being dependent on and derived

solely from oral narratives which have been collected in languages different from what I speak, then interpreted by the native speakers, and then again transliterated into English – leaving space to the narratives for dilution. Personal limitations for me as a woman from mixed cultural backgrounds and ethnicities may not be prevalent for other interested and invested researchers focusing on women's folklore in the hills in future, which comes off with wider scope to work there in deeper lengths.

2 Contextual Background of Research

2.1 A brief historical assessment of the conflict between ethnic minorities and Bangalis

The ethnic minority communities of Bangladesh make up less than 2% of the total population of the country that is 168,121,440 (as of Sunday, August 7, 2022, based on Worldometer elaboration of the latest United Nations data), a number that is declining gradually, as per the national census (Bangladesh Population & Housing Census, 2011). Among around 75 ethnic minority communities, Bangladesh's government recognizes 27, under the 2010 Cultural Institution for Small Anthropological Groups Act.

The British left the Indian Subcontinent consisting of India and Pakistan in 1947, and Bangladesh was a part of Pakistan. Fighting for language and civil rights, the Bangla speakers finally achieved freedom from Pakistan and became a state after achieving freedom in 1971. The country got establishment as a secular one, including Bangalis and other ethnic minority communities residing in different corners of the land. The ethnic minorities who mostly belonged to the hills of Chattogram started to face the blow as early as in 1972 through marginalisation, imposed migration, and alienation with the mechanisms of constitutional denial by designating them to be non-Bangali ethnicities and forced militarisation of their land and areas. During 1979 to 1984 there are around 400,000 Bengalis were said to have been settled in the CHT (Anwar, 2020, Doctoral Dissertation, University of Dhaka) who migrated from plain land as a part of Government policy and sponsorship. After actively participating in the Liberation War in 1971, they got a constitutional name which was 'backward segments of society'. With these steps structural violence on the ethnic communities other than Bangalis had begun; thousands of people from the plain lands had been resettled in the hills without solid plans; throwing peace, the secular ideals of the country, and land rights at stake. Development had taken place in the form of a hydro-electric plant in Kaptai washing out many lives.

2.2 Sociopolitical contexts of Chakma, Marma, and Tripura communities

Chattogram Hill Tracts (CHT) stands on the Southeastern Bangladesh, and is divided into three political and administrative districts - Rangamati, Khagrachari, and Bandarban, and divided into three circles as well - Mong Circle, Chakma Circle, and Bohmang Circle. Each of these circles, consisting of multi-ethnic populations, is headed by an ethnic chief (Raja) who is

responsible for collecting revenue and regulating the internal affairs of villages. The Chakma Circle is headed by a Chakma Raja and the Mong and Bohmong circles by Marma Rajas. Every circle is divided into revenue villages headed by a Headman selected by the local circle chief. Then within each revenue village there are about five to ten villages, each headed by a village chief. Apart from the traditional system there is a local government system strung with the central government, since 1960. In this subsection only the sociopolitical situation of the three major indigenous communities - Chakma, Marma, and Tripura communities will be discussed.

The Chattogram Hill Tracts still follow the traditional social, administrative and judicial systems for all the Jumma people (Jumma is an umbrella term for the ethnic peoples from the hills used by themselves), including the Chakmas. The Chakma Raja's main tasks include circle land and revenue management, supervising ethnic customs, handling matters pertaining to social justice, attending the Hill District Council session, advising the district administration, and recommending the recruitment of the Headmen. A headman can report on land settlement, lease transfer, preserve and control the forest resources, direct the customary law, manage conflicts according to custom. A *karbari* is the head of a village who generally tries to maintain unity, solidarity, and peace among the villagers. There is a large political organisation of the Chakma community which is still politically active. The Chakma Youth Association, the first organisation of the Chakmas in CHT, was formed in 1915 under the leadership of Rajmohan Dewan during British rule.

The Marmas still have a strong influence of traditions in their political life. Although much progress has been made in politics among the Marmas, it can be said that the traditional elite demography in the Marma society is still playing a policy-making role in decision making. Like the other indigenous peoples of the Chattogram Hill Tracts, the Marmas have not yet been able to assert their democratic political credentials. Although there is a slight representation of Marma leadership in the regional and national politics of the country, these representatives either come from the elite or from the educated middle class. From some interviews it has been clear that the community thinks that the ordinary Marma people are far removed from democratic politics.

During British rule, members from the Tripura community did not get much opportunity to participate in the political process. Especially in the special system of governance in CHT, the Tripuras were deprived during the circle-division. At that time no circle head was appointed

from the Tripura community though the present Khagrachari district and Mong circle is the border area of the mainland of the state of Tripura. Tripura people got their initial experience of democratic politics through the introduction of basic democracy by General Ayub Khan in 1956. Birendra Kishore Royaja, the first graduate of the Tripura community during the Pakistan period, was elected a member of the East Pakistan Provincial Council (MLA) in 1954. This day, people of Tripura community actively participate in politics sharing similar views with the other ethnic minorities, to eradicate conflict and to achieve the rights.

2.3 Women's position and fetishisation in the indigenous communities of Chakma, Marma, and Tripura Communities

Women's position in the sociopolitical context is a very important discussion for this dissertation. Bangladesh suffers from great gender inequality. In both public and private domains, women get controlled by the society in a manner that they face hard time to claim their rights to contribute to themselves and the society. While Bangladesh scores high for women in politics, it's still one of the toughest countries to be an employed woman. Women's objectification can be considered to be one of the most vital issues to highlight. In this sub-chapter women's position in Chakma, Marma, and Tripura communities is explored discussing the information collected from interviewing the peoples of these communities.

Like all exploitative and patriarchal societies, the position of women in Chakma society is not equal to that of men. In many families, women are still considered useful only for agricultural and household matters. According to Chakma inheritance law, women have no right to patrimonial property. She is entitled to only the property received as a gift from her father or husband. There is much more to male dominance in decision making on various family and social issues. In terms of education and employment, women's participation or opportunities are less than men. Women still suffer from the oppression related to inability to pay dowry, acid attacks, murder of wife, rape etc., acts that were not traditionally present in Chakma society. Even then, violence against women exists in many ways. A lot of accusations are pointed by the ethnic peoples at the 'settler' Bangalis. Chakma women are victims of communal violence by a large section of the population of Bangladesh. In particular, they have been the victims of rapes, abductions, murders, forced marriages and conversions. They are

generally victims of communalism and ethnic oppression, and as women are trapped in the shackles of patriarchal society, Chakma women are twice as likely to be exploited.

From the interviews, Marma women's position is respectable in the community though they still have to follow gendered work distribution. Men and women have equal status in family decision making. Marma girls have the right to choose a life partner, and to divorce. Remarriage of women is allowed in Marma society. There are no barriers for women to enter the temple and take part in prayers. In Marma society (Bomang circle) women have legal right to inheritance of property. Women get a share on the husband or ancestral property. Marma society is interested in women's education, derived from the interviews. There are no social barriers to working in an office. However, like other women from ethnic minorities, Marma women have been subjected to various forms of communalism. Violence against Marma women are not isolated incidents in CHT. Even though the signing of the Chattogram Hill Tracts Agreement on December 2, 1997, ended the armed conflict, the violence against these women did not stop.

In Tripura society, women play an important role in family life – livelihood and economic activities. Apart from child rearing, Tripura women participate in agriculture and household chores. Tripura women have an important role to play in the practice and development of the folk culture of the Tripura people. They do not enjoy the same property rights, decision-making, right to education, participation in socio-political organisations etc. as men. They are also victims of various forms of oppression at the state level. The presence of military rule in CHT and the settlement of settlers are major threats to the security of these women from rape, murder, abduction, and indecency.

Even though, I have only discussed the status of women in these three communities, regardless of their ethnic minority group, women from other different ethnic minority community in the hills are also objectified and fetishised by tourists, military officials, and the Bengali Muslim settlers, which is noted from the account of multiple Bengali young male tourists:

“These girls (from ethnic minority groups) are one of the tourist attractions, because of how different they look from regular Bengali people. They are not looked at as humans, they are just products to look at, or even try out if there is a chance, for tourists. It is easier for Bengali Muslim settlers to ‘have’ them, because they reside here, and they do not bother not assaulting

them into sleeping with them. The military officials are involved in the prostitution business. So, every now and then they feel entitled to getting the service for free.” (Male, 24, Bangali, Khagrachari)

2.4 *A cross-cultural description of Chakma, Marma, and Tripura peoples' institutional and non-institutional religious practices and beliefs*

The Chakmas are mainly Buddhists and 'Hinayani' Buddhist books, translated into Chakma and written on palm leaves, are known as *Aghartara*, is an ancient scripture, which is believed to have been written in a creole form of Burmese and Pali. Religious ceremonies are performed in Chakma society by *luri* or travelling Buddhist monks. The Buddhist priests called *Luri* or *Ruri* are now almost extinct. As Buddhists, the Chakmas celebrate several religious festivals apart from the folk festivals. Buddhism is assimilated with vernacular practices and rituals among the Chakmas who believe in supernatural forces such as nature, ghosts, demons, and gods. However, some Chakmas have converted to Christianity in recent times in a effort to escape religious persecution and discrimination. At present there is a growing tendency among some of the Chakmas to convert to Christianity due to insecurity of livelihood, forced evictions from their homes by settler Bangalis and government forces, land grabbing, extreme poverty, lack of employment etc. Although the Chakmas are Buddhists, some of the influences of Hinduism are noticeable. They also worship some deities. The Marmas are mostly Buddhists (Theravadins), but at the same time in the socio-cultural context they believe in animism. Different types of worship of gods and goddesses are also prevalent in this society. They believe that evil spirits also have an effect on natural disasters such as floods, famines, and epidemics. They believe that natural calamities and misfortunes are the result of the displeasure of various gods and goddesses, and they try to satisfy these gods and goddesses and evil spirits through worship. Marmas' nature worship includes mountains, rivers, forests, trees, etc. There are also some Christians in Marma society, but this number is very small. The Tripura people are mostly Hindu, some of them follow Christianity now. The deities they worship are mostly Hindu deities.

The folk religious practices of these three ethnic minority communities gain surge when it comes to rituals during liminal times like weddings, illness, exorcism, birth, death, between the ending of the old year and beginning of a new year, and other events like rituals to be

economically stable, to gain fame, for happiness, for rain or to barricade themselves from natural calamities, diseases, enemies etc. These practices, rules, and prohibitions are unique to these communities as folk religious activities and rituals, and are not regulated by the religions: Buddhism and Hinduism. In the Chakma community there are myriads of rules which are not mentioned in the scripture but are still followed by the people in different stages of social life; these rules and relevant rituals are mostly related to marriage, land ownership, cultivation, food etc. Among the Marma people nature worship, worship of different deities, and satisfying the dead souls through sacrifice etc. are prevalent; their folk religion consists of more than the practices of Buddhism. In the Tripura community there are more religious practices than regular Hinduism as well; their folk religious practices involve happiness in family and social life, economic improvement, safety etc. They also have some form of nature worship. Their rituals get the most emphasis in the events of wedding, birth, and death. Understanding and going through each of these three communities' plenty of folk religious practices may need more time and space, nevertheless, it can be said from participating in many of them during the ethnography that, these practices involve the material life, difficulties of being minorities, struggling with the nature and lack of resources, social regulation etc. Their vernacular religion revolves around life more than solely their spiritual connection with the divine, and its source is life's necessities more than solely spirituality. Perhaps that also is a reason that their practices and values go beyond the Hindu and Buddhist or Christian scriptures and practices.

2.5 Perception of ghost, possession, and the supernatural

As I have mentioned in the previous sub-chapter, the indigenous peoples' epistemologies often derive from teachings transmitted through storytelling, are rich in perceptual experiences (e.g., dreams and visions), and arise from the close interconnections between humans, spirits, and nature. Among the interviewed communities, ghosts are supernatural entities that can be categorised in two types: of human realm and of divine. The ghosts that happen to be the departed souls of humans, are the former kind, and the spiritual entities that are either deities or 'low class' spirits that are born as non-human beings belong to the latter kind.

The low-class ghosts are made by the divine creatures to serve humans and deities. They do small chores. Not any human can make them do their chores. You have to be a special human, a *baidya* (local healer) to be able to control one of these ghosts. One way to make them do what you want them to do is paying a *baidya* to summon a ghost. The *baidya* has to agree to do your work too. If he does not agree, no amount of money can buy you the favour. We humans are bad people. We want to do mostly harm to other people through the ghosts. Most *baidyas* will not agree to do these. They will agree to do perhaps

things like finding you a spouse, or making you better in studies etc. There are *moga baidyas* who are bad people though. They live deep in the forests, they remain hidden, away from human civilisation busy with their worship. It is hard to catch them free. If you do, they may agree to do even the ill deeds you might want them to. They do not take much money as well, none of these things is about money. You do pay some amount to any *baidya* yes, but that is only because they are humans, and they have to live as well. (Female, 48, Chakma *baidya*, Rangamati)

Possession can be of two different kinds in these communities. One kind of possession is when a human or an animal's body is taken over by a spectral entity which can be either a divine deity or ghost, or a human's departed soul. Another kind of possession does not necessarily involve taking over of a body, instead may mean a relationship with any type of spectral entity. Why I call the relationship with a supernatural entity 'possession' as well, is because the interviewed people believe that someone who has and maintains a relationship with such an entity are possessed and controlled by the entity.

The narratives selected to discuss in this dissertation are related to ghostlore concerning and focusing on women. These are the narratives of the *atiprakrit* or supernatural, as considered by the peoples themselves which they describe as related to powers and entities that are otherworldly, and bridged by incidents like spirit possessions etc. These narratives include different types of ghosts, ghosts within the group, ghosts that belong to the people of the military and the Muslim settlers, ghosts of Bengali tourists who did them wrong.

An important note before going into the next chapter is that in this work the words ghosts, deities, dead souls etc., have been used instead of the local vernacular terminology (for example, *bhudo* in Chakma, *nai* in Marma, and *matai* in Kakbarak/Tripura are words for ghost). There are multiple reasons behind such decision: controversy among the same group of people on the usage of words, evolution of some local terms into nearly Bangla terms, difficulty in collecting the different forms of similar terms etc. After examining the various concepts due to their similarities to the regular concepts, it has been I decided to use closest analogue in the English words for the mentioned words because this as that helps to enhance the chance of better understand the narratives and their implications and at the same time, reduces confusion and conflict. Additionally, my informants, themselves used stock words for ghosts -*bhudo*- to tell me the stories.

3 Women's body as a site of oppression and resistance: possession, othering, and reclaiming

Female body's construction, controlled sociocultural location, acceptability and censorship of sexuality etc. are parts of the politics of a female body which the indigenous women of the Chattogram Hill Tracts spontaneously undergo that involves "socialisation involving layers and levels of ideological influences, sociocultural and religious, that impose knowledge or ignorance of female bodies and construct woman as gendered subject or object." (Katrak, 2006) Women here are controlled in terms of the key factors like sexuality especially as they are expected to be the guardians of culture and tradition. From being a romantic muse, to a loving mother, to a wise old crone – women's bodies are bound to look, process, and work some certain limited and selected or standard ways. The shaming of the natural functions of female body may be connected to the shaming of low or no productivity for different lengths of time, stemming from the stigmatisation, othering, instillation of standards etc. practices of power over women.

Every society is different, regardless of what one can see from a bird's eye point of view, the causes, indicators, catalysts etc. can be different and contextual. This chapter discusses the politics of female body – how they possess or are possessed in multiple ways, the instrumentalisation, objectification, othering or altering of female body, the power, strategic use, resistance, reclamation, and resilience. My analytical interpretations combined with both etic and emic perspectives say that, women's ghost narratives create such multilayered vernacular realities that, they regain the powerful site that their physical bodies are, besides structural violence practising power by exploitation of those very bodies. Their legends are the indictment of oppression and depravity.

3.1 Weaponising the Beauty: "She will possess your ability to love and lust"

The notion of separating a female body from the others by the parameter of beauty is not new. These othered women may come to attract the attention of anyone regardless of age, gender, type etc., can become subject to objectification and thus carry the risk of being harmed. However the legend of the beautiful singing whistling female ghost sends a suggestion into

peoples' perception that she can be so beautiful that after seeing her the male gaze would not prefer any human woman's image, not necessarily stopping men from looking at or for a strange female entity so beautiful rather tantalising –

I would like to at least see the *petni* (female ghost) who makes you disregard any human woman's beauty after seeing her... She is so beautiful you wouldn't call her a ghost. (Male, 27, Chakma, Bandarban)

On one hand, the suggestion that attribution of 'otherness' by beauty imposed on a supernatural entity sends after seeing such a beautiful female ghost making a man's gaze unable find any human woman beautiful enough for them to pursue, can effectively influence the man in actually not finding a human woman attractive enough to chase or be with. On the other hand, this othering can leave the existing human women around these men feel inadequate and devalued.

When my husband was a teenage boy, he saw one of them and fell in love. That woman fell in love with him too. Since then, my husband never liked another woman's looks. The woman didn't bring any harm to my husband because she was in love. But now she is jealous and angry, my husband tries to tell her that his mum brought me, and he didn't like me. Still, she is jealous and tries to warn me of harms if we ever try have a child... He sleeps with me only when she possesses me making me look like her... No, I do not look into the mirror when I become her, I am not within myself when she is me, I am her. (Female, 24, Chakma, Lama)

Beauty and 'beautyism' have been used as a strong tool for aesthetic 'othering' by the industry, media, and society which can be seen as another form of oppression, nevertheless can also be weaponised as a safety tool. In the book "Politics of the Female Body", Ketu Katrak analysed the multiple ways how the female body becomes a site of both oppression and resistance.

Not only in the dark, even the during daytime, if you see such a beautiful woman that attracts your attention, she might be it. (Male, 59, Marma, Bangalhalia)

Once a man sees a lonely female entity at a strange place where she 'does not seem to belong', the man has to take caution, and decide if she is the female ghost which would mean a few things: she may possess his forever love, he will not find any human woman attractive, she may harm him in other ways like physical and mental health, social and cultural connections, daily life, economic stability etc., unless he does not leave the place that instant saving 'himself'. While saving themselves from something otherworldly, these men may be considered 'safe' for a woman alone in the middle of nowhere. Sharing such narratives and allowing these to transmit, women are up to making a point, creating a meaning. Bakhtin's paradigm-shifting work gives enormous importance to (such) dialogue, to the open-endedness of speech and orality, of discussion rather than closure. Katrak writes,

Female uses of religious and cultural modes such as possession and magic are useful weapons of resistance to patriarchal control... Oral storytelling and dialogue are significant forms used by women... These are enabling concepts in theorising female agency especially in creating different forms of resistance via speech, silence, and the female body.... Dialogue is a crucial aspect, perhaps a first step toward overcoming racist and sexist oppression. (Katrak, 2006)

Older female members or motherly figures of a family make growing boys and men aware of such 'dangerous' situations where sheer patience and control against both natural sexual instincts and perverse are the tools to save men the trouble. Through the performance of storytelling, women send the message to these men that they ought to stay away from the pursuit of women in uncharted or dark or strange places in order to save 'themselves'. However, if somehow the female entity is unavoidable, there can be a 'security' conversation until a way to escape is found or help arrives. Such conversation is 'played' by both parties:

I have had a conversation to avoid such a female ghost. She was drawing me towards her with her otherworldly beauty, but I kept my eyes closed or pinned to the ground, and kept repeating how I had no intention of indulging in any sort of relationship or communication with her. She on the other hand kept laughing as if she was possessed and behaved like a lunatic with weird and abnormal hand gestures! (Male, 28, Chakma, Rangamati)

The language of such stories straightens out the thematic characteristics of such encounters in a way that, people in that area are very well aware of however the encounter and/or dialogue may go. Here I am indicating that there might be predictability in such dialogues. There are specific patterns (might vary in different contexts) in the conversation or dialogue that a person can have with a possessed person who would be the vessel for a supernatural entity. As Malik (2019) argues,

It is the conversation (or game) that is in the foreground, having an existence is almost independent of the speakers; the speakers' subjectivity is held in abeyance, much like the subjectivity of a possessed person. The speakers, in fact, enter and explore the emerging that terrain of the conversation that unfolds as they speak. (Malik, 2019, p. 577)

Neither is it difficult for the men of the area to maintain the easy cues for him to stay safe, nor is it unbelievable if a woman performs her part by playing the role of a dangerous entity if caught in a vulnerable position reversing the position of vulnerability. The exercising of this manner of physical performance led by the legend from the collective conscience, births the possibility of recreating the legend at an instance and conjures a shared reality in practice. The part that both men and women play during these encounters work toward resistance and recuperation against sexual vulnerability.

3.2 *Utilising the Mystery of Female Body Functions: “I handle dangerous matters”*

Indigenous women of this third world country that is Bangladesh are expected to be the bearers and enactors of traditions and cultural aspects. They utilise this power of bearing when it comes to claiming ‘otherness’ as a form of resistance from structural violence and hegemonic discourses. On another note, othering non-motherhood or m(othering) as a concept is deeply rooted among the peoples. The mothers and non-mothers face and handle their type-specific oppressions in their own different ways. However, as the indigenous peoples articulate sexual politics they define women in terms of motherhood in multiple ways – as the mother of children, as cultivator of nearly infertile hilly lands, and as bearers of traditions besides lineage. If not mother of these, women get to be seen as mothers of something else, the supernatural.

They (unmarried non-mother women) raise and feed their ghost pets. These ghosts stay in their womb area, and feed off of their keepers’ menstrual blood. This is a very old stream of knowledge a woman had to learn the hard way earlier. Slowly as mothers teach their children, grandmothers teach their grandchildren, it is widespread. These women offer the ghosts their womanly charm, their company, and blood. (Male, 40, Tripura, Khagrachari)

Here, as long as a woman is unmarried, her body specifically the womb is home for innumerable microscopic ghosts who protect and abide by these women, slowly making her womb either ready or infertile to give birth in the future depending on how the woman is treating them. With such perceptions as much as the women are held responsible for any future miscarriage or inability of bearing children- their bodies, sexuality, and other bodily functions are rather mystified even further. This idea also gives birth to the narrative “only evil women bleed every month” provided that women have to feed their ghost pets their own blood for a few days once a month.

There’s a Buddhist belief that ghosts eat blood. A menstruating woman is then thought to attract ghosts, and is therefore a threat to herself and others. An example cited by the Buddha Dharma Education Association says, that while fermenting rice, menstruating women are not allowed near the area, or the rice will be spoiled. (Bhartiya, 2013)

Since being vocal about menstrual health is still stigmatised in this part of the world, most men do not have a clear idea about what goes on when a woman bleeds for a few days every month, leaving menstruation as a mysterious phenomenon. If somehow word of mouth spreads from a person to another about a woman bleeding every month, the grapevine almost ruins that specific woman’s social life. At the same time, the female body being a source of both pollution and nutrition remains a mystery to men, inducing the ever-known fear of the unknown. One may presume that during this era of media and knowledge sharing, quite a lot of fog has been lifted;

nevertheless, the contextual shared reality can say otherwise. What can be argued though (and I have faced this question a few times during my study), is that, how people still do not know clearly about menstruation when even the old scriptures have the mention of it. It is not necessarily the fact that people here are not aware of the idea of menstruation. What should be focused on instead is that they are introduced to this idea in a different way, they live with the idea while hearing multiple types of narratives, and they produce their own concepts on the idea as they collect more knowledge. None of these steps is powerful enough to uproot the embedded perceptions regarding menstruation.

During their study on two Indonesian societies about narratives on menstruation Hoskins finds that men who look at a woman on her period may have their vision impaired. They argue that in almost all societies a profound ambivalence about bodily emissions, particularly genital bleeding, is found; and that those societies, like in Sumba Island of Indonesia, do not mark menstruation obviously may nonetheless harbour a deep fear of the consequences of menstrual contamination. Hence, secret menstruation can be more closely linked to witchcraft, illness, and betrayal than the social practices of menstrual seclusion and pollution. They also write:

Menstruation becomes something more secretive, still potentially dangerous and even infectious (in its links to sexually transmitted diseases) ... Why, then, do men and women in some societies find menstrual blood so powerful and fearsome, while in others it is much less the subject of public management?... Huaulu women were proud of the fact that they controlled a dangerous flow of blood, and they emphasised its creative and empowering aspects. (Hoskins, 2002)

While menstrual bleeding can be a known phenomenon, it can still instigate people or a society to interpret it as a tool for othering and fear. Among the indigenous peoples in Chattogram Hill Tracts the initiation of menstruation marks a girl's nubility which is not really celebrated by these girls. Their attempt of avoidance of such indication comes out with defensive narratives and cautionary lore. Making men aware of the ways how bleeding can harm male body as well as affecting female body enhances the chances of bodily defence, which can be done through the supernatural narratives. There is an idea here that the canine can smell this 'polluted and disease spreading' blood and becomes aggressive; they can act strange like trying to sniff the blood from a closer proximity near women's vaginas, barking at them etc. This idea hangs from the same string of tales regarding the canine's ability to sense and smell the evil, death, diseases, natural calamity, and not the least, the supernatural entities. While dealing with such 'dangerous' matters on hand, women here can reclaim their spiritual power over their own

bodies through relevant folklore, in a similar way that the Huaulu women are proud of dealing with a matter as dangerous as menstruating every month.

3.3 Repurposing the Objectification: “I am the possession of someone bigger than you”

Women’s body has been managed, guarded, and controlled by the family and the society forever, birthing the form of objectification which gives the female body a status of property. Women’s power can be analysed as a concept of female strength like autonomy over own female body reclaiming which can disrupt economic and sexual power hierarchies. Resistance among women can mostly be seen through strategic use of their bodies, through speaking back, singing, telling stories, performance etc., which also require ample courage. It is crucial to decode indigenous traditions of female resistance and resilience.

When overt defiance of patriarchal structures carried severe penalties such as social exclusion and exile from community, and even death, women creatively invented covert means with which to resist. The goal was survival. Covert resistances are couched in folktales, mythology, religious scripture, popular culture, uses of magic, and obeah (indigenous ritual practices). (Katrak, 2006)

Women here take their bath-time routine seriously. Since the hill tracts have become a core site for tourism business, there are tourist spots set up in different locations scattered all over the hills not necessarily in a planned way where the indigenous peoples would have a say. Many waterbodies where women bathe and complete their chores have been included among the tourist attractions without properly fixed boundary or timing. It is not that tourists are prohibited to go near the waterbodies like streams and lakes during these women’s bath-time. Being robbed of the privacy of daily life, women feel out of place and watched as a part of the natural display. They may get looked at and photographed without permission. Such objectification may dispossess these women of their regular comfort in living in their natural habitat.

They watch women bathing, like I said they’re mischievous. When women bathe, the ghosts just watch. But if men of any age except for young boys come to the bathing areas at that time, the ghosts can get jealous. They can possess the men and make them fall sick and eventually take them into the water. The ghosts tend to push them into the lake water. They can make the land under men’s feet slippery. Men see they can get physically hurt if they try to win against the ghosts, so they keep caution and stay away. (Female, 23, Chakma, Bandarban)

The ghosts ogling at these bathing women are referred to as male supernatural entities who may in some cases possess greater volume of lechery and can show them in offensive ways that men in those areas would not usually do. The lewd ghosts sometimes throw stones in the water

targeting a specific woman they liked, steal that woman's clothes from the shore, break the woman's clay water vessel, or even touch the woman underwater. Since these entities are not visible, neither can their steps be followed, they are free to do anything they want with these women. With that possibility being open, not necessarily there are direct narratives of women being so badly harmed by these ghosts as much as the men. As a part of popular ghostlore in the country, ghosts spontaneously tend to reside in waterbodies because it is easier for them to inhabit without most of the barriers one has to face on the land, like places being changed, trees being cut, population shifting, technological changes etc.

Humans cannot fully know water. The relationship humans have with water is about limits—the limit of what is survivable and habitable. (Neimanis, 2017)

It is not surprising to anybody with this piece of information on mind that there can be ghosts that desire women while they are bathing in the waterbodies inhabited by ghosts. The waterbodies inhabited by these male ghosts are also implicitly demarcated as the other, special waterbodies which are effeminate due to their soft rhythmic flow, clear water, capacity to hold more freshwater fish that women catch and are regularly consumed etc. The effeminate virtue of these waterbodies is more explicitly noted by the use of these waterbodies by men during their bath-time self-gratification routines. These waterbodies epitomise-

potential that is generative and affirmative. This 'immersion' is consequently seen as a material moment of interconnection that involves entanglement with the 'other'. (Rae, 2022)

We like to do it (self-gratification) there. We crack small jokes about idea of women have had their bath here not so long ago. Those excite us. Maybe the ghosts join us during those times too, or maybe not because they cannot be seen even if they did it in front of women! (Male, 23, Chakma, Bandarban)

3.4 Transgressive Relationships with Spirits as Bodily Boundary: “Don’t anger ‘him/her’”

When it comes to bonding with a supernatural entity, the way spirit possession is usually defined paradigmatically shifts from a supernatural being taking over someone's body and mind to someone deliberately creating a contextually functional relationship with a spectral presence. How it is a colossal shift in definition is that the human-spirit power dynamic of a spirit possession no longer works in the same way here. Such relationships rather step into the dimension of regular human to human relationship dynamics. A human body is more than merely a vessel or a host when a spirit and a human agree to be together as a couple or grow

any type of romantic tension. Regular communication and conflict occur in these relationships as well.

He (spirit husband) would not want to eat or sleep after a fight. (Female, 33, Chakma, Bandarban)

There is still a power dynamic in such a relationship which may consist of process of exchange at the foundation of it where the spirit is ‘feeding’ on the power it can draw from a human’s mind and body, at the same time infusing the human with its own power the transaction of which can be visible in the behavioural changes in the human counterpart of the relationship. This kind of conjunction that is as much of a sacrifice of autonomy as a human-to-human marriage, extends the power from the spiritual realm to the human world which may efface alterity on one hand, othering the human consort in the human world on the other. The othering due to the exchange of power in such conjunction is that the human counterparts are both feared and sympathised with by the people around them.

He comes to me because I make him happy. He eats out of my soul, and for me he leaves gold and other precious metals in the hole of that (points outside the house) big banyan tree’s trunk. When I was younger, many men wanted to marry me. They used to disturb me. I did not like any of them. I had a very close female friend. She got married at 17. I became alone. It’s okay, a woman needs to get married to support themselves economically, and to save themselves from other people. One day I was coming back home from the canal with water. It was evening. I got scared seeing a masculine figure, and fainted. I was in bed for a month after that. I have no memories of that whole month except for the masculine figure being by my bedside. My family members or anyone couldn’t see him. After a month, I recovered slowly and started talking to the manly figure. We became physically and emotionally close. Then we got married. A spirit priest completed the marriage ceremony late at night, seven years back. (Female, 33, Chakma, Bandarban)

The ‘beautiful’ girls attract ghosts, and may leave them alone once they ‘lose’ their ‘beauty’. This specific beauty is defined and perceived by the people that have been interviewed has a standard, which surprisingly is accepted by the ghosts. One element is common in such relationships which is extreme jealousy of the ghosts which can again be translated into ‘possessiveness’ of their human counterparts.

Does the jealousy of the spirit spouse, for example, reflect the jealousy of the divine powers that are battling for the souls of human beings, or is this a metaphor for the power dynamics of human relationships? Might this be a metaphor for relationships of power and attraction outside of one’s immediate relationship, or a fantastic mirror image of such relationships—which cannot be consummated in the manner of a material relationship, not having the fullness of the physical dimension, with jealousy possible in both directions. (Sarbacker, 2011)

The questions posited by Sarbacker prove relevant in the present context: such jealousy is hard to deconstruct on its own, nevertheless its effects can be perceptible in multiple ways. In the societies like the ones in these hills where the ideas of different identities like gender and sexual

orientations may be completely ignored even if raised, it is understandable how the crises relevant to identities may echo through the supernatural tales, encounters, possession, relationships, even marriage – reflecting the ‘other’ side. Sarbacker (2011) also argues that such jealousy, analogously, could stand for a reality that would be familiar in the context of polygamy or polyandry (or in contemporary polyamory), where jealousy and other emotions must be held in check or dealt with in strategic ways. In their analysis, issues like fidelity in the spiritual and sexual dimensions of life may serve as a model for the complexity of relating to the larger ‘spiritual family’. Marriage brings social order to the world, spirit marriage to the spiritual world paralleling this world—perhaps with clear implications in the opposite: bodily marriage, spiritual effects; and spiritual marriage, bodily effects. Another question would be, “Does the gendered body enter into this equation, and therefore reflect an idealised spiritual order?”—which is a point that may have implications with respect to the issues like that of gay marriage.

When my husband was a teenage boy, he saw one of them and fell in love. That woman fell in love with him too. Since then, my husband never liked another woman’s looks. The woman didn’t bring any harm to my husband because she was in love. But now she is jealous of me, my husband tries to tell her that his mum brought me and he didn’t like me. Still, she is jealous and tries to warn me of harms if we ever try to be pregnant. How would I get pregnant anyway? He does not even get aroused for me! She has made it physically impossible. (Female, 24, Chakma, Lama)

Although the answer of who made the arousal physically impossible is very easy and clear to people here, it is a hard question to answer which only gets easier with the assertion of a supernatural entity. Rather than being othered because of own ‘uncommon’ orientations, it might perhaps be much preferable to be othered for something that is acknowledged in such societies, like the transgressive relationships with supernatural beings.

She was my sister’s friend. I had a crush on her. She told us about her marriage with a ghost herself. She became more beautiful after that. She wore better clothes and jewellery. There is no particular sign, except she has dark circles and eye bags. You might feel the ghost’s presence if you are near her, I’m not sure. But if it is a bad time to be near her, the ghost can react and hurt you, no sign needed for that! We do not let our sister be friends with her anymore. (Male, 34, Marma, Rangamati)

What provokes the teller of this narrative to stay away and keep his family away from the girl may be identified as the ghost she has been married to, nevertheless the distancing may be suggested and implemented by the enforcement of the formal idea of marriage between two realms shifting power from one to the other where needed. Similarly, the narratives of an old woman being married to her fiancé after he had died forty years ago, or the divorced young woman having a new spirit partner may be the subtle indicators of the chosen celibacy and

boundaries created by these individuals which would not be otherwise processed, supported, or sympathised by the societies they live in.

I say don't worry, there's already someone in my life. You better not anger them. (Male, 38, Tripura, Rangamati)

4 Women's Ghostlore, Regulation of Social Order, and Women's Positions

Women as expected to be bearers of tradition and culture not necessarily hold much active agency in shaping the society. Yet, they work in covert ways to sculpt their surroundings, this is also where the notion of resistance and resilience can be discussed. "Art is critical for communities of colour because it constitutes one among many rare locations 'where acts of transcendence can take place and have a wide-ranging transformative impact'." (Hooks 1995, 8) In the hills here, women express themselves through their arts and crafts, sewing patterns, music, dance, storytelling etc. Storytelling registers survival on two scores—the survival of the storyteller and that of his/her listeners. The storyteller survives to tell the story and his/her listeners survive because they learned from the story; those that fail to learn do so at their own peril." (Nnaemeka, 1997) Through such oral transmission, women find freedom and self-expression to a certain extent where it might become feasible for them to contribute to awareness of their surroundings and situation, and some sort of transformation.

In oral narrative, women are free to compose, recompose, and disseminate creations that more often than not reveal unexpected voices. Reality, as they construe it, projects fantasy about protest against, resistance to, and satisfaction with their society in ways that are free of filtration and censorship. (Kanaka Durga 1999a)

In the transmission of folklore, women perform their part by internalising traditions and values and perpetuating them for generations by expressing them in their own lives which may be uncontainable and unfathomable due to the covert nature of their lifestyle. Women talk, they tell stories. Stories are a means of preserving common characteristics of a culture and passing them on to subsequent generations. The storytellers make images contributing to own knowledge and survival, creating messages and remembrances. They are aware of how their stories have the power to either subvert or support their representation, and they ought to create space for their images over other representations of them. Chinua Achebe describes storytellers:

The storyteller who recounts the event—and this is one who survives, who outlives all the others. It is the storyteller, in fact, who makes us what we are, who creates history. The storyteller creates the memory that the survivors must have—otherwise their surviving would have no meaning... (Achebe, 1989, p. 337)

Struggles to express and break free through practising storytelling, gossiping, grapevine etc. not only involve comprehension and changes in oppressive social conditions, but also delve

into examining the conscious and unconscious impact of individual and collective subjugation that affect the interior lives, subjectivity, and spirituality. Using oral narratives like this, women portray their identities into imaginative landscapes, be those realistic or imaginary. This way they achieve some narrative empowerment. They make sense of the situation, condition reality through embodied and spatial storytelling. In the narratives of teaching the female children about crime, deviance, order etc., it is evident that women take assistance from storytelling and folklore. The indigenous knowledge that stems from lifestyle, geographical, political, economic, social positions, reach of resources etc., spreads through oral transmission. Oral traditions, whether communicated as historical narratives or mythical stories, constitute a form of traditional knowledge that can teach, carry, and reinforce other knowledge. Among indigenous groups, oral traditions serve as the collective memories of ethnic, tribal, and kinship groups, a formal “corpus relating to the whole society” (Vansina 1985:19). Information is typically passed on through acts of story-telling that are both literal and metaphorical, as they verbally reconstruct connections with the past (Bruchac 2005; Johnson 2007; Vizenor 2008). As Gerald Vizenor (Anishinaabe) articulates it, oral traditions in the hands of a skilled teller, a storier, can evoke elemental realisations. “Native storiers of survivance are prompted by natural reason, by a consciousness and sense of incontestable presence that arises from experiences in the natural world, by the turn of the seasons, by sudden storms, by migration of cranes...by the favour of spirits in the water, rimy sumac, wild rice, thunder in the ice, bear, beaver, and faces in the stone.” (Vizenor 2008:11). Hence, I focus on women’s positions in public and private space – as transformers, coworkers, grandmothers, mothers, sisters, wives, daughters etc., and their roles in sculpting and regulating social order.

4.1 The Collective Trauma among the ethnic minorities and Collective Guilt among the Bangali community

According to the IWGIA (International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs) Report–14 titled: Militarisation in the Chattogram Hill Tracts, Bangladesh published in 2012, Militarisation in the CHT began during the Sheikh Mujibur Rahman’s regime in 1973. The demand of Regional Autonomy for the indigenous peoples in the CHT was met with establishment of three full-fortified army cantonments in Ruma, Alikadam and Dighinala places of the CHT. Even though there has been an Accord, popularly known as ‘CHT Accord’ signed in 1997 between the government of Bangladesh and the ethnic minority communities aimed at solving the CHT

crisis peacefully and politically, yet militarisation and Islamisation drive under the army did not stop. Ever after 23 years after signing of the CHT Accord, the government has kept the significant issues of the Accord unimplemented yet. Instead, in one hand, the government has kept implementing process of the Islamisation program while on the other, continues with the military rule and militarisation drive.

The indigenous peoples of these highly militarised areas struggle with the imposed military manoeuvres superseding the local civil administration. It is a highly sensitive matter of controversy to discuss in the context of Bangladesh. A very relevant topic that falls within the limited scope of this research is the ghost of the ‘Olives’. Olives are the name for the military officials given by the indigenous peoples in the hills. According to the narratives, the ghosts of Olives are the worst of all the ghosts because of the nature of violence they bring upon these peoples.

In the hills and we believe all the areas where there have been armed forces, there are olive ghosts. They kill young men, they beat up and rape women, they set houses on fire – everything that a living olive does. Olives are the worst, as humans as ghosts. They do exactly the same things as alive after death. They loot, kill, hurt, rape. I have heard the cries of women being beat by them. I have heard many stories. Some people saw olive ghosts taking away and killing an old single mother’s only son. These are tragic stories. I tell my children, their spouses, and the grandchildren to be away from the olives, as humans and as ghosts. We often relive the same incidents that happened years back in the same place, we can see those tragic incidents as they happen in front of our eyes. Sometimes some of us know these are not happening now but happened years ago, but the Olive ghosts show us the incidents over and over again, in the very places they did those unspeakable things to our people. (Female, 46, Chakma, Rangamati)

There are also narratives like a Chakma person while walking back home at night stopped at some groaning noise, tried to look behind some bushes, found out that an Olive ghost is sexually assaulting and asphyxiating a woman at the same time. The passer-by claims that he knew the woman. She has been killed the same way that he saw in front of his eyes, but quite a few years back. An idea that can be introduced in this discussion as well is the touchstone. Some stories support the development of intimate relationships among tellers and listeners by serving as touchstones. Touchstones are things that remind people of a shared heritage and/or past. Certain stories bring forth a whole series of deep-seated memories about experiences that either cannot be or are not easily articulated. Storytelling has evoked feelings and memories of what it is to be a woman of African descent across time or space within the research setting (Banks-Wallace, 1998). Sarris (1993) discussed a similar phenomenon within Native American culture, and Simpkinson and Simpkinson (1993) used ‘sacred story’ instead of touchstone to

identify this particular type of story. Different versions of the mentioned narrative go around the hills like a touchstone. Women tell them to their daughters, relatives, friends.

I tell them girls not to ever fall in love with those handsome Olives. They are dangerous. I know stories, horrible stories. (Female 56, Chakma, Rangamati)

A story that ignites collective guilt skulks about in the hills, it comes up from the narratives of the young male tourists of a specific tourist spot. Upon investigation a few clustered cottages have been found to be a station like brothel, the system is that prostitution service is sent from these cottages to the male tourists as per request. Some of these sex workers could not be interviewed because of ethical reasons (underage).

Some of the male tourists have witnessed the inexplicable horrifying scene themselves through their tourist cottage windows. This usually happens past midnight, when the whole area is deep asleep, and there is a huge full moon. A young indigenous girl, bare naked, starts walking slowly from one side of the hill where their cottages are (points at the prostitution service cottages), takes her time to reach the other side of the hill where there is a helipad, and jumps from there. You would think she would die jumping off the hill, but no, she comes back in no time out of thin air to the exact spot where she began. Then she goes to the helipad and kills herself. She comes back. She keeps coming back and dying. She repeats. (Male, 22, Tripura, Khagrachari)

These male tourists have already assumed that the girl who repeats to kill herself comes from the designated cottages, that is meant for the sex workers to reside. One of the members of the interviewed group expresses:

It (the story) makes me wonder if I could or we could do something for these poor young girls. The tourists do not even consider them women or humans, they are highly eroticised due to their different looks, languages, and natures than the mainlanders. It does not surprise me that some of them were raped and killed, and came back as ghosts to haunt us, and perhaps themselves, to remind everyone that their deaths have not been avenged. (Male, 25, Bengali tourist)

Such narratives call for a discussion on the emotions of collective guilt. From the work of Wohl, M. and Branscombe, N. R. (2006), a sense of pride and satisfaction from their group and its history, reminders of colonisation, slavery, torture, and genocide, when part of the ingroup's history, have the potential to evoke collective guilt and create a desire to amend the wrongs committed. Nevertheless, in extreme cases,

the perpetrator group may perceive members of the victimised group as outside the sphere of humanity. In such cases, harm is inflicted on another group, but guilt is not experienced precisely because such treatment is perceived as entirely justified for those who are outside the ingroup's sphere of justice (e.g., they are not 'people' like us). Therefore, collective guilt should not be considered an automatic consequence of perceived ingroup harm doing. In fact, collective guilt might be a rather rare phenomenon precisely because people have a variety of strategies that allow them to legitimise their group's harmful actions.

The interview of the Bengali tourist where they accused the Bengali community of not considering women from the ethnic minorities as humans, comes to be attuned with the research mentioned above. Yet, in the recent setting of ethno-political context, there may be some collective guilt response among the youth who are in fact detecting and mentioning the forced validation of various committed wrong. The stories going around the hills among young Bengali male tourists may be the reflection of the indigenous peoples' past trauma as a group, their collective conscience and guilt as the dominant group, the revelation of such uncontrollable emotions etc., where every such thing comes together and out in the forms of fear and lore of ghosts.

The narratives of supernatural entities create social 'others' who do not belong to the groups and instead may be harmful in emic point of view: like the army officials, social and administrative authority figures who have affiliation with the dominant Bengalis, Bengali and foreigner tourists etc. Due to the hills being a salad bowl of multi-ethnicities, these areas are not ethnically or religion-wise homogenous. Ghost narratives of every area from every ethnic group tend to contribute to creating social 'others', such othering can occur within the group (male-female, *baidya*-general people, possessed-unpossessed etc.), or between ingroup and outgroup (tourists-ethnic peoples, administrative figures-civilians, settler-indigenous etc.). A multi-faceted process like social cohesion can be triggered as well by the supernatural folklore in these areas. Group cohesiveness among social groups of different ethnic communities in the hills is based on the shared experiences of being oppressed by the dominant group (the Bengalis). Ghostlore that belong to some categories may reflect shared points of bonding.

4.2 *Women's Role in Influencing Society from Marginal Positions and Possessions*

In order to discuss this section, one ought to go through the idea of indigenous knowledge, values, right and wrong among these communities. The relationship between indigenous morality and the supernatural existence could be as easy to understand as the Boogeyman disciplining a child, can at the same time be as complicated to comprehend. Ghosts with higher ground in morality and values may create the idea of right and wrong, good and bad among the indigenous peoples through possession of the female members of a family, seating the female at the position of the regulator of social order.

Indigenous stories are full of resonance, memory, and wisdom—in a footing that is structurally free of power imbalance. (Ferna'ndez-Llamazares, A', Cabeza, M., 2017)

Women may express anger in covert ways. In a society where they are expected to be a certain way, in order to practice some extent of power, to teach a lesson, to enforce the order, women may play their role in a different way than the male practice of maintaining social order. This notion is not as linear, neither is it discounted from criticism. Malik (2019) drawing upon Bourguignon's (2004) work, has discussed that due to their lesser status to men, women utilise the complex ritual, narrative, as well as somatic and psychological mechanisms of possession to regain and reinstate their voice through socially and religiously legitimate means. He complies that the embodied state of alterity expressed through the ritual processes of possession then becomes, in this explanatory model, a channel for symbolic action, and that these are mostly 'unconscious' strategies adopted by socially deprived actors. He writes,

I use the word alterity to describe the possibility of multiplicity (and permeability) in the phenomenal world and the possibility of divine presence in human life. But there is a radical departure from the usual philosophical understanding of the 'other', whether human, non-human, or divine. In fact, I would like to bring in the notion of 'another', rather than 'other'. (Malik, 2019)

There is a deity assigned to each household, which possesses the essence of the house, and the house becomes that entity. The house gains life and agency. If you keep the house dirty, the house will protest. If you wrongly change anything in that house, the house will become aggressive. As long as you are fair to the house, the house will remain happy and serve you with what it is supposed to mean to you. (Male, 50, Marma, Bangalhalia)

From the narratives, the house, when it becomes aggressive or protests, it protests through the mouth of someone as a medium. The softest, weakest people in the house are the best as mediums to possess. The idea of weakness, vulnerability, softness here are attributed to femininity. Women in the house are the perfect mediums.

The house possesses my wife. Before she had entered the house as a bride, the house used to possess my mother. Whenever someone among us in the household kept the house dirty, my mother used to react in an unnatural way. If there was an intruder, if there was an uninvited guest we do not want, she used to react. Now my wife does, the very similar way that my mother used to. My mother and my wife are different people. In fact, I married her shortly before my mother had died. How would she adapt how my mother used to behave? She couldn't have. It is the entity that engulfed the house, the spiritual essence that triggers and possesses my wife to behave a certain way. (Male, 40, Marma, Bangalhalia)

To explain the phenomenon, whether it is a divine embodiment or it is the women practising their agency to speak up in a covert way is not a simple discussion. To understand the depth of it in a similar context, I again go to Malik's (2019) work where he quotes Keller (2002) to critically appraise the question of possession, agency, and women. He complies that Keller raises issues like the notion of agency in particular to the rediscovery of women as agents, the

new framework for understanding possession, particularly possession involving women, in her notion of instrumental agency, her argument that possession is not a symbol for action; it is action or disciplina that produces knowledge in the bodies of the possessed where possessed body is an instrumental agency – a body marked by its activity’, etc. Here instrumental agency, rather than being a matter of individual volition and intentionality, is created through the agreement of a social group or community.

Consequently, here again, agency shifts from being located in the private, and perhaps even isolated realm of the individuated self, to that of the shared space of the public realm. The critical issue then of how we view and approach the phenomenon of ‘possession’ rests on our conceptualisation of what constitutes agency and person or rather ‘subject’. As I have already pointed out, in the Indian context, the reality of the social subject is deconstructed because it is based on a false apprehension of the concreteness of a bounded, individualised self. (Malik, 2019)

What prodded the discussion to go further into Malik’s work is women’s position from private space or isolated realm to public or shared space. The mentioned bounded, individual self with its reality as a social subject comes out in the shared space through spirit possession.

Whenever we (men) do something wrong, they (women) will be possessed by the ghost that controls our behaviour. They (women) stay indoors, they are not supposed to even know what we (men) are doing outside of the confinement. Yet, they react to our misbehaviour. How they do it is no longer a mystery. We know that this is not them (women) who are reacting and punishing us for our wrongdoing. It is the ghost that possessed them (women) that is aware of everything we (men) have done out of the women’s sight. The other day, one of us got heavily beat up by his wife, because he has been sleeping with another woman behind his wife’s back. He has been doing this for last few months. There is no way the wife has any clue about whatever has been going on. Usually she is calm, soft, and sweet in nature. But one sudden evening, he goes home to something you can call a monster that looked like her. She stormed into him with a sharp knife, and charged. Not a serious injury happened, not that we know of, the guy tackled her well. But the way she spoke, aggressively, was not like her. There was an extreme scary session of confrontation of the misdeed the guy happened to have done. The monster of a woman took the word from him that he would never again commit such a crime. Afterwards, everything calmed down, the wife fell unconscious or asleep, he carried her to bed and let her rest. The next morning she was the same old nice and sweet wife, as if nothing had happened. The guy asked her if she had heard anything bad about him, or if she had been mad at him for any reason. She answered in the negative with a kind smile. No, she knew nothing. (Male 34, Marma, Bangalhalia)

To understand such confrontational spirit possession, there is a need to understand women as well, their idea of self, their idea of agency and rights, their idea of knowledge and secret. How a grandmother, a mother, a sister, a wife, a daughter, a caregiver etc. perform their part in the social construction, is an important point to elucidate. A caregiver who simply serves with chores etc., would not go ahead and give a speech about wisdom that a grandmother would. Similarly, a daughter or a sister would not react the same way to a man’s extramarital affair that a wife would. A mother’s viewpoint of a man’s adultery will be different than that of a wife’s.

To allow possession to represent what it is, that is, the possibility of a multi-dimensional self in which self and other are identified through 'equivalence, enmeshing, and continuity' while operating in a public rather than private ritual domain, and the possibility of alterity in the sense of divine 'intervention' as such (whether in the public or private domain), is to question the foundations of a modern secular state built on the notion of the bounded, separate individual who is in complete control of her/his life and destiny. (Malik, 2019)

The shift in one's personhood during such possession is noticeable, complying with Malik's argument. There are imaginary and non-imaginary 'hero' figures among the interviewed communities. The nurturing ones among them are female. There are motherly female ghosts who take care of the woods and animals, flora and fauna that possess the mothers, sisters, wives, and daughters if a man causes any harm to the nature. They react, they punish, they give ultimatums, they reinforce order. Similarly, if someone borrowed money from another person and never paid back, if someone harassed another person, if someone mixed water with milk before selling etc., the ghosts that watch over the moral integrity of the peoples in the society, take over their mothers and wives. The existing women of the society shapeshift and turn into those nurturing hero(in)es when situation arrives.

5 Theorising Indigenous Women's Folklore of Resilience

Women from indigenous communities in Chattogram Hill Tracts live in a state of outsider in multiple ways: as female, as indigenous, as vulnerable, as possessed, as (un)productive etc. I have picked up supernatural narratives of these women that reflect their resilience against the structural violence, gender-based abuse, and social construction that work as oppression towards them. Their supernatural encounters and ghostlore revolve around regaining and reclaiming the power that their bodies hold.

In this chapter I attempt to analyse the ghostlore of women as legends from the hills, in order to understand the narratives, the 'believing' of belief, the politics, and the teleology of the legends. In my consideration, it is necessary and fruitful to understand the theorisation of the genre the narratives may be categorised in, in the process of interpretation of the narratives in the sociopolitical context of the hills. At the same time in this front the politics and purpose of the telling and the dynamics of hearing of the narratives gain emphasis.

5.1 *Believing the 'Legends' of the Hills*

Reading the impact of the supernatural narratives is a necessary topic for this dissertation since that is what determines the value of believability added to the stories making them 'work'. The folk supernatural narratives collected from the hills can be considered the legends of the hills due to their nature, creation, growth, and transmission. It is important to examine how legend is defined and how the legend theory works if one intends to explore the beliefs regarding the supernatural narratives of the indigenous women in these hills. In order to place the collected narratives under the discussion and to look into the sliding scale of believing them, I have tried to incorporate the work of Timothy Tangherlini on legend theory.

Legend, typically, is a short (mono-)episodic, traditional, highly ecotypified, historicised narrative performed in a conversational mode, reflecting on a psychological level a symbolic representation of folk belief and collective experiences and serving as a reaffirmation of commonly held values of the group to whose tradition it belongs. (Tangherlini, 1990)

Tangherlini's definition and arguments on legend may be related to the narratives in the context of the ethnic minority communities of Chattogram Hill Tracts. He argues that when in a contextual position, legend may not be neat or compartmentalised narrative, and would not be

performed for a captive set of audience. Instead, during the performance of such narratives, legends tend to show its nature as open ended, with no certain beginning. They proceed contextually, fit, and starts in situation. They can be interrupted by the others' observations, can be subjected to humour, and can serve rhetorical purposes. I second this understanding of the legends from the hills.

If you hear a woman cry alone in her room, and smell something foul, she is actually feeding her pet ghost. Do not go near her room. (Male, 54, Tripura, Khagrachari)

There is a 'do' or a 'do not' after almost every category of these narratives, making the stories act as cautionary tales or warning legends toward the people of the hills. These legends support the birth of different folk beliefs regarding how the treatment of women and their bodies, the nature, the natural resources etc. may work. When it comes to folk beliefs concerning the supernatural, these legends reinforce such folk beliefs, in which process the legend narratives derive part of their credibility from the seated folk beliefs. In the context of the hills here, the folk beliefs grow around the ethnic peoples' worldview where they are oppressed, and their lands are militarised; they are aware of the idea that they might need to adapt to the contemporary technology and education in order to either cope with or break free from the confinement. The uncanny similarities between the way that germs and Sexually Transmitted Infections work, and the tiny ghost infestation works speak for such understanding.

Unmarried women have thousands of tiny ghosts in their genitalia. If you have sexual intercourse with them, these will transfer to you and make you fall sick, your genitalia will become useless soon after. (Female, 44, Chakma, Bandarban)

The effects are visible since the legend has been sculpted to fit the contemporary ideas about sexually transmitted diseases, their possible causes, and symptoms. Having health care centres far from the place to live, these legends also soften up the harsh truths regarding health crises, through utilisation of the folk health beliefs in a subtle manner. The conversational nature of these narratives adds to the credibility of the legends and functions as a mechanism to reaffirm these.

The legend is a complex genre which is not restricted to supernatural dimensions. It includes. material and inspiration drawn from the poetic and the fantastic, the historical and the social space. It is also a genre of symbolic expression, which manifests a specific worldview. As a belief – related genre, the legend can also express the anxieties and insecurities caused by a rapidly changing society, fears of the unknown, aspirations towards economic stability and other important matters of social psychology. As an emotionally charged genre, the legend also draws social borders between in – groups and out – groups. (Valk, 2014)

Myriad of motifs come forward from the mono-episodic contents of the legends, which are interconnected. Because of the number of references found in any specific relevant account of narratives, the connections and meanings of such legends are shaped for the understanding of only the indigenous peoples in the hill tracts. The historical, ethnographic, and performative context of this specific geographical location and the specific demography heavily unexplored in academic field. It is important to understand that the widely used interpretative approaches may not be enough to understand the meanings of these legends. In the ‘synthetic approach’ of rigorous examination of the text, Tangherlini (1994) proposes, legend reflects the collective values of the group to whose tradition it belongs, a suggestion which points directly at the deeply political nature of these folk narratives (Tangherlini 1994, 22). Under the lenses of such discussion, legends are already believable accounts as the narrators perform these as true, although it cannot be confirmed how much the narrators themselves involve themselves in believing the account. The believability also may depend on the ongoing negotiation of cultural ideology that decides the context of the performance of the legend.

Because of the rhetorical weight of legend, as an expression of something that “might well have happened,” the stories can become a significant component of an individual’s political behaviour, informing his or her actions as they negotiate daily life in communities and organizations. Tradition participants also deploy legends to sway others’ actions, often to align with the narrator’s own goals. Often these goals have a strong economic or political component to them (Tangherlini 1998b). (Tangherlini, 2009)

As per the same discussion, the narrators of the legends have some agency to a certain extent to mould the cultural ideology provided that they share similar culture and teachings with the interlocutors. Through the cumulative effect created by the variation of strategies during the repetition of stories within the group, such shaping and/or reshaping may occur. Tangherlini (2009) explains this slow but possible process of change may lead to exclusiveness in an extreme level, which is how the telling of legend is a quite political act. The transmission of legend and the believing of it certainly can be deeply political, which takes this discussion to the next, to the teleology of the legends of the hills.

5.2 *The Legend Theory in the context of Chattogram Hill Tracts*

The best case would examine legends as discrete performances but also as part of the broader folklore repertoires of multiple narrators from a diverse, yet linguistically and culturally related area, set against a thick understanding of the historical, political, social, and economic forces that influence day to day life, and coupled to a clear understanding of the backgrounds and motivations of the collector or collectors. (Tangherlini, 2009)

Social, economic, geographic, political and psychological forces at work in a given society are important influencing features which should be included in any consideration of tradition (Tangherlini 1994). As the oppression of women can be a recognised strategy for suppressing the group of people, attempts of empowerment of these women's security can as well be considered a strategy to break out of this oppression. Tangherlini (2009) tables the idea of telling of legends being deeply political in a manner that, without having a solely positive or entirely negative impact on a community, transmission of legends can provide people with a sense of shared identity, solidarity and in the same process exclusivity. The supernatural accounts reflect such collective experience that the audience of the same group will agree to behave a certain similar way as the narrator. The narratives about the 'olive' ghosts also perform a political function wherein covert resistance to the militarisation of CHT are transmitted. Also, all the tradition participants do not 'hear' the stories same way, there can be ambiguity in the telling of the legends depending on the group of people and context, and yet they can be communicated successfully according to the observation of Fish (1980).

Around this corner the narrative of the tiny ghost infestation can be visited in a much-detailed manner:

Girls right before and since their puberty and Women until their marriage contain thousands of tiny ghosts in their genital area which work as a support system for their intimate health so that the female body can grow to carry a healthy child in the future. The micro ghosts generally feed off their bearers' menstrual blood. If a girl gets pregnant and their menstruation cycle stops due to premarital sexual activities, the ghosts prematurely die remaining unfed for days. Even the child may come out botched. Who takes care of the woman's body then? Nobody. Their bodies start to show signs of despair. For a man, while fooling around if he goes even near an unmarried girl's or woman's genitalia with his, the ghosts take the act as an offence of something foreign to the female body, and they attack to prevent such offence. As the ghosts attack the male genitalia, after a few days of that attack, the man can see some signs like burning sensation during urination, difficulty in defecation, itchiness, and painful blisters on an around the genitalia, something like pus oozing out of the private part etc. Their private part can become useless. One woman's body's ghosts are different than another's. So, if a man goes around sleeping with different unmarried women, he is sure to lose his organ. There is no way to get rid of these ghost infestations. If you like a girl, you go get married to them. If you by any chance have slept with one woman before marriage, get married quickly before the ghosts get to infect you. After marriage the ghosts will go back to the woman's body from yours, they will make peace, and ultimately leave. (Female, 44, Chakma, Bandarban)

This narrative goes around the hills as tiny ghost infestation distancing people to keep them away from deviant sexual behaviours. Interestingly, while these people believe that the tiny ghost infestation is harmful and a negative impact on their own communities, some of them 'jokingly' express satisfaction in the idea of how indigenous female sex workers can infect the Bengali male tourists and military officials who take services from them. The legend's content being connected with the function of eradicating sexual deviance and is not divorced from the

politics of resistance from the military oppression. Tangherlini likes to propose that although legends do not get constructed by the route of historical facts, situating legend historically is a crucial component of interpretation. (Tangherlini, 2009). The deeply rooted historical trail of oppression hangs at the end of each string in the legends of the hill tracts.

In the cautionary legends of ‘Olives’, the immediate fear of the communities’ immediate past and present, is reflected, making historical context very important to bring into account in interpreting the meanings and purposes of legends. In this context where legends are not performed in just an occasional storytelling session but are included in daily lives, teachings, and banters – ethnographic and historical information such as the history of and reaction to the oppressive militarisation can be mined out from the legends.

In the orientation, the narrator chooses the in-group for the story—usually people whose background is very similar to that of the tradition participants. The complicating action propose an out-group and a specific form of threat to the in-group. How the in-group member reacts to the threat can be seen as a representation of a strategy for dealing with this type of encounter. In legend, the encounters tend to be extreme, but can be extrapolated to less extreme examples that are common in everyday life. The resolution—positive, negative or neutral—reflects the narrator’s attitude toward the chosen strategy. (Tangherlini, 2009)

Considering the thick influence of historical and ethnographic contexts present in the legends, the performative context being daily life’s conscience, complaint, and cautionary practices, the legends of the hills may be interpreted to suit the cultural, political, economic, and social position of the ethnic minority communities, and to serve the purpose of reminding, guiding, and shielding them.

Conclusion

“DNA makes us, in part, the ghosts of our ancestors. We embody scraps, fragments, and glimmers of our forebears. We are shadows of who they were.” (Thomas 2007) If we are what we (our ancestors) were, we also are what we have been put through. The narratives from the hills needed little to explain, for most of them have been already traced back to the sore spots by the narrators themselves, the communities themselves. The play upon vulnerability, power, and empowerment have raised necessity enough for the narratives to manifest as legends. The lessons I have learned during this ethnographic fieldwork may also be helpful for myself and future researchers. Customisation, improvisation, and any kind of change for betterment may be highly appreciated for further study. One of the most important requisites I consider for further investigation is the necessity of documentation of the folklore from the Chattogram Hill Tracts in general, which can be best done by and/or with the help of the indigenous peoples. The noted possible barriers in further fieldwork may include physical barricades due to militarisation, cultural shock, collective fear of assisting with any documentation process, limitation of access to remote areas and people, rapport building, lack of funding, personal limitations, and such. Nevertheless, further research is recommended for deeper understanding of multidimensional aspects of folklore in the hills, also because there is a huge gap in relevant literature in the mentioned context.

However, at this point to summarise the aftermath there is clear and evident grievance and resentment on the part of the indigenous peoples due to the militarisation and positioning of Bengali Muslim settlers in the hills, and relevant difficulties they have to face in their social, cultural, economic, and political life. Since I have mostly focused on the indigenous peoples’ life and point of views, the perspectives of Bengali Muslim settlers as residents of the hills may remain vague to this particular research. After analysing the data, the resistance and resilience of the peoples have come to light. Especially women in the hills seem to be reclaiming their bodies, their power to regulate the order of the society and the social life of the people, and their positions in private and public space of the society. The legends are acting as a functional tool in their resilience in the manner of a covert mechanism to cope and/or retreat. At this liminal phase of the transition from having no power to gaining it back, their folktales can be

traced as their very own framework of survival. The ambiguity of legends offers them a shed to sit back and reorient during their journey of struggle against structural violence.

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Resume

Kummitavad mehed: usundilised jutud ahistamisest ja seksuaalsest vägivallast Bangladeshis Chattogrami mägede etniliste vähemuste seas

Selle magistritöö aluseks on minu aastapikkune välitöö Bangladeshis Chattogrami mägedes elavate chakma, marma ja tripura põlisrahvaste juures. Küllastasin kõiki piirkondi, et koguda, analüüsida, mõista ja tõlgendada naiste hulgas levinud usundilist pärimust vaimolendite kohta. Minu intervjuueeritavate seas oli umbes kuuskümmend inimest – nii naisi kui mehi. Töö käigus selgus, et naissoo diskrimineerimine ja nende vastu suunatud vägivald on leidnud väljundi folkloorsetes enesekaitse- ja toimetulekumehhanismides. Uurimus kajastab etnograafilist välitööd sotsiaalpoliitilises keskkonnas, milles domineerib väikerahvaste ajalooliselt kujunenud konflikt bengalite kui suurrahvaga ja naiste alla surutud seisund. Väitekirja käsitleb teemasid nagu naiste usundilised praktikad ja vaimujutud, naiste üleloomulikkusetaju, nende panus ühiskondliku korra ja tavade alahoidmisse ning võimusuhetega seotud küsimused. Selgitan oma töös, kuidas üleloomulik jutupärimus kujundab naiste positsiooni privaatses ja avalikus ruumis ning peegeldab isiklikke ja kollektiivseid traumasid. Lähtusin rahvusvahelisest muistenditeooriast ja uurisin rahvajutu funktsioone ühiskondliku tegelikkuse kujundamisel, sugupoolte vaheliste võimusuhte reguleerimisel ning vastupanu osutamisel ahistamisele ning seksuaalsele vägivallale. Väitekirja üks põhijäreldusi puudutab usundilise rahvajutu funktsioone käitumisnormide kinnistamisel ja naiste turvatunde hoidmisel ühiskonnas, kus nende positsioon on habras ning kergesti haavatav.

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