

## FICTIONALIZING THE FALL OF DHAKA: A NEW HISTORICIST READING OF SARMILA BOSE'S UNDER SUCH A SHELTERING SKY

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### Abstract

This paper offers a New Historicist reading of Sarmila Bose's novella *Under Such a Sheltering Sky* (2021), which narrates the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War through the intertwined perspectives of a Bengali family in Dhaka and a West Pakistani army officer. Drawing on Stephen Greenblatt's and Louis Montrose's accounts of the reciprocal "historicity of texts" and "textuality of history," the paper argues that the novel does not function as a transparent record of the Fall of Dhaka but as a text that actively participates in producing a particular kind of historical meaning. Close analysis of the novel's dual focalization, its selective compression of mass violence relative to individual encounter, and its consistent relocation of political stakes into domestic space shows a text structurally organized around the plurality, rather than the settlement, of historical truth a position the novel states nearly explicitly through its own recurring aphorism that "one man's freedom fighter is always another man's terrorist." Reading the novel alongside the contested historiography of 1971, including the documented controversy surrounding Bose's own earlier nonfiction, *Dead Reckoning: Memories of the 1971 Bangladesh War* (2011), the paper argues that the novel's silences particularly its near-absence of the war's extensively documented sexual violence are as significant to its historical positioning as its inclusions. The paper contributes what appears to be the first sustained literary-critical treatment of this text, and proposes a method for reading contested war fiction that treats historiographical dispute as a co-text for literary analysis rather than a standard against which fiction must be verified.

### Keywords:

*New Historicism; 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War; Sarmila Bose; war fiction; South Asian literature; historical memory*

## 1. Introduction

The 1971 war that ended in the secession of East Pakistan and the founding of Bangladesh remains one of the most contested episodes in South Asian historiography. Its casualty figures are disputed, its causes are narrated differently by Pakistani, Bangladeshi, and Indian historians, and its memory continues to be mobilized for present-day political purposes on all sides (Raghavan; Bass). Literature has offered one of the more enduring routes into this contested history, not because fiction can resolve the historiographical disputes, but because it can dramatize how such disputes are lived in households, in friendships, in the collapse of ordinary loyalties.

Sarmila Bose's *Under Such a Sheltering Sky* (2021) is one such text. A journalist, lawyer, and political scientist whose earlier work, *Dead Reckoning: Memories of the 1971 Bangladesh War* (2011), generated considerable scholarly controversy for its revisionist treatment of wartime atrocity figures, Bose turns in this novella to fiction to narrate the same historical rupture from within a single Bengali household in Dhaka. The novel follows Milon, a young man drawn toward the Bengali nationalist movement, and Captain Sameer, a West Pakistani army officer posted to a rapidly disintegrating East Pakistan, whose paths cross when Sameer is captured and later given shelter by Milon's family. Through this structure, the novel stages the war not as a single, settled narrative but as a set of competing, intimate experiences of the same historical moment.

This paper argues that *Under Such a Sheltering Sky* is best read not as a transparent record of the Fall of Dhaka but as a text that actively participates in the production of historical meaning selecting, foregrounding, and eliding particular experiences of 1971 in ways that are themselves historically and ideologically situated. Reading the novel through New Historicism, a critical approach that treats literary texts as inseparable from the discourses, power relations, and other “texts” of their historical moment (Greenblatt; Montrose), allows this paper to examine the novel's narrative choices its dual focalization, its handling of violence, its use of domestic space as themselves a form of historical argument, rather than as a straightforward window onto 1971.

It is worth noting from the outset that Bose's own historiographical work has been a subject of significant scholarly debate, particularly regarding her estimates of wartime sexual violence and civilian casualties, which a number of historians have challenged on methodological grounds (D'Costa; Mookherjee; Saikia). This paper does not adjudicate that historiographical dispute. Its object is the novel, not the historian's prior nonfiction though, following New Historicist method, it treats the fact of that authorial history as part of the text's own “co-text,” relevant to how the novel's choices of emphasis and omission might be read.

### 1.1 Significance of the Study

Scholarship on Bangladeshi and Pakistani fiction of 1971 has tended to divide along national lines, with Bangladeshi criticism often reading such fiction as testimony to Pakistani state violence, and a smaller body of Pakistani-authored or Pakistan-sympathetic fiction read, when it is read at all, as either apologetic or reconciliatory. *Under Such a Sheltering Sky* written by a Bengali-heritage author but structured around genuine narrative sympathy for a West Pakistani officer sits awkwardly across this divide, which is precisely what makes it a productive object for New Historicist analysis: the novel's discomfort with taking a single side is itself a historically legible position. This study contributes a close, theoretically grounded reading of a text that has received little sustained literary-critical attention, and offers a model for reading 1971 war fiction as a site of contested discourse rather than as evidence for one national narrative or another.

## 1.2 Purpose, Objectives, and Research Questions

This study undertakes a New Historicist reading of *Under Such a Sheltering Sky*, examining how the novel's narrative structure and language stage the Fall of Dhaka as a contested historical event rather than a settled one. It treats the novel's fictional strategies focalization, silence, the domestic framing of political violence as evidence of how historical narrative is constructed, and reads these strategies alongside, and against, the historiographical debate surrounding 1971.

The study pursues three objectives: (1) to examine how the novel's narrative structure constructs and juxtaposes competing perspectives on the Fall of Dhaka; (2) to analyze what the novel represents explicitly and what it elides, and what this selectivity suggests about the text's historical positioning; and (3) to explore how the novel uses domestic and intimate space as a site where political power and historical trauma are negotiated. These translate into three research questions: How does the novel's dual focalization through Milon and Captain Sameer construct competing discourses of the Fall of Dhaka? What does the novel's selective representation what it shows, softens, or omits reveal about its own historical and ideological position? And how does the text mobilize domestic space to negotiate between political power and personal history?

## 2. Theoretical Framework: New Historicism and the Textuality of History

This section sets out the theoretical framework guiding the analysis that follows: New Historicism, focusing narrowly on the strand of literary theory associated with Stephen Greenblatt and Louis Montrose, and on the specific conceptual tools this study draws from it the “textuality of history” and the “historicity of texts,” the treatment of literary and non-literary writing as mutually constitutive, and an attentiveness to power, discourse, and the marginal voice.

New Historicism developed in American literary studies during the 1980s, largely in response to two earlier dominant modes of reading: the ahistorical close reading of New Criticism, which treated the literary text as a self-contained aesthetic object insulated from its social and political context, and a form of literary history that treated historical context merely as background information against which an autonomous text could be explained (Veese 1–2). Stephen Greenblatt, working primarily on Renaissance literature, is generally credited as the movement's central figure; his *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (1980) is widely cited as a founding text, and the term “New Historicism” itself is usually traced to Greenblatt's introduction to a 1982 special issue of *Genre* (Greenblatt, Renaissance; Veese 2).

Where New Criticism read the text as autotelic, New Historicism insists that literary works are inseparable from the “social energies” and material conditions of the moment that produced them (Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations* 6). Crucially, this is not a return to older forms of literary history, which typically treated history as a stable, retrievable backdrop and literature as its passive reflection. New Historicism instead treats history itself as a kind of text something constructed, selective, and narrated while treating literary texts as historical actors in their own right, capable of participating in, rather than merely reflecting, the ideological work of their time (Montrose 20).

### 2.1 The Textuality of History and the Historicity of Texts

Louis Montrose formulates this reciprocal relationship in a phrase that has become central to the theory: New Historicist criticism is concerned with “the historicity of texts and the textuality of history” (Montrose 20). The

historicity of texts means that literary works are shaped by, and participate in, the specific social, political, and institutional conditions of their production and reception. The textuality of history means that history itself is not a neutral, fully recoverable set of facts standing behind the text, but is itself always mediated through texts official records, testimony, journalism, other literature each shaped by the perspective, selection, and omission of whoever produced it (Montrose 20; Gallagher and Greenblatt 15–20).

This second point is especially significant for the present study. If history is textual if it reaches us only through narrated, selective accounts then a novel like *Under Such a Sheltering Sky* is not a fictional supplement standing apart from the “real” historical record of 1971; it is one more text in a field of contested texts, alongside military records, survivor testimony, journalistic accounts, and rival historiographies, each making its own selective claims. This is the specific sense in which this paper treats the novel as a co-text of, rather than a report on, the Fall of Dhaka.

## 2.2 Power, Discourse, and the Margin

New Historicism's attention to power is substantially indebted to Michel Foucault, particularly his account of power as diffuse and productive rather than simply repressive operating through discourse, institutions, and everyday practice rather than only through visible, top-down force (Foucault 26–27; Veaser xiii). New Historicist critics accordingly read literary texts for the way they register and negotiate power relations that may not be explicitly named how a narrative's sympathies, silences, and framing devices can themselves enact a form of ideological work. This attentiveness extends to a concern with marginalized or subordinated voices excluded from, or spoken over by, dominant historical narratives (Gallagher and Greenblatt 20). Applied to a text about 1971, this means asking not only what the novel says about the war, but whose experience it grants narrative authority, whose suffering is rendered in detail and whose is summarized or omitted, and what this distribution of narrative attention might itself reveal about the discursive position the text occupies.

## 2.3 Method and Application

Following Greenblatt and Montrose, New Historicist practice typically involves reading a literary text alongside contemporaneous non-literary material official documents, journalism, testimony, other cultural artifacts not to establish which account is factually correct, but to see how the literary text's strategies of representation compare with, depart from, or reframe those found elsewhere (Barry 172–75). This study adopts that method: the analysis that follows reads passages from *Under Such a Sheltering Sky* alongside the historiographical scholarship on 1971 (Raghavan; Bass; Saikia; D'Costa; Mookherjee), not to verify the novel's historical claims against a settled record, but to identify where the novel's narrative choices align with, diverge from, or complicate the range of existing historical accounts.

This study draws three specific analytical tools from this framework: the novel as historical actor rather than passive reflection, meaning that formal choices such as focalization, pacing, and the balance of description versus summary are treated as meaningful acts of historical interpretation; selective representation as ideological signal, meaning that gaps, omissions, and compressions in the novel's treatment of violence and political causation are read as significant rather than as the ordinary economy of fiction; and domestic space as a site of power, meaning that the household in which Sameer is sheltered is read as a space where state violence, hospitality, and personal loyalty are negotiated against one another. These tools structure the readings developed in the following sections.

### 3. Literature Review: The Contested Field of 1971

This section situates *Under Such a Sheltering Sky* within two overlapping bodies of scholarship: historiography of the 1971 war, which remains sharply divided on questions of causation, casualties, and culpability; and literary-critical work on Partition and 1971 war fiction, which has increasingly moved from reading such texts as national testimony toward reading them as sites of contested memory.

#### 3.1 The Contested Historiography of 1971

Scholarly accounts of the 1971 war diverge sharply on scale, causation, and responsibility. Srinath Raghavan's *1971: A Global History of the Creation of Bangladesh* argues against the assumption, common to Indian, Pakistani, and Bangladeshi national narratives alike, that Bangladesh's independence was inevitable, situating the war instead within the wider international context of decolonization and Cold War rivalry. Gary Bass's *The Blood Telegram: Nixon, Kissinger, and a Forgotten Genocide* documents the Nixon administration's knowledge of and complicity in Pakistani military atrocities, drawing on U.S. diplomatic cables most notably the dissent cable sent by U.S. Consul General Archer Blood from Dhaka to argue that the killings constituted genocide on a scale comparable to other twentieth-century atrocities.

Set against this is Sarmila Bose's own prior historiographical work, *Dead Reckoning: Memories of the 1971 Bangladesh War* (2011), which is directly relevant to a study of her subsequent novel. Bose's history has been accused by critics of flawed and biased methodology, historical negationism, and downplaying the genocide committed against Bengalis; the book argues that atrocities were committed by both sides and that memory of the war has been dominated by the narrative of the victorious side. This reading was contested at the time of publication by, among others, Columbia University scholar Naeem Mohaiemen, writing in the *BBC* and in *Economic & Political Weekly*.

Scholarship on gendered violence during the war has been similarly contested but has moved toward greater documentation of survivor testimony. Yasmin Saikia's *Women, War, and the Making of Bangladesh: Remembering 1971* draws on survivors' own accounts of rape, loss of status and citizenship, and the postwar experience of "war babies," explicitly working against the way national narratives in India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh have each cast the war in self-serving terms without conveying its human cost. Bina D'Costa's *Nationbuilding, Gender and War Crimes in South Asia* similarly examines how subaltern narratives particularly women's have been either delegitimized or selectively appropriated by nationalist elites to fit a patriarchal national narrative. Nayanika Mookherjee's *The Spectral Wound* extends this analysis to the postwar politics of memory itself, arguing that the Bangladeshi state's public honorific for survivors, *birangona* ("war heroine"), paradoxically keeps survivors in public memory while flattening the diversity of their actual experiences. Estimates of the number of women raped during the war remain disputed even within this scholarship, with officially cited figures ranging between 100,000 and 400,000.

This body of historiography establishes two things relevant to the present study: first, that no single, uncontested account of the war's scale or causation exists even among professional historians; and second, that Bose's own prior nonfiction occupies a specific, contested position within that scholarship one that several historians have characterized as minimizing. This paper treats that positioning as relevant context for reading her subsequent turn to fiction, without itself adjudicating the underlying casualty and atrocity disputes.

### 3.2 Literary Criticism on Partition and 1971 War Fiction

Literary scholarship on South Asian war fiction has increasingly resisted reading such texts as straightforward testimony or propaganda for one national narrative, instead attending to how fiction stages memory as itself contested and constructed. Work on 1947 Partition fiction a critical tradition 1971 war fiction is frequently read alongside, given the two events' structural echoes has established that literary narrative can hold multiple, incompatible historical claims in tension without resolving them, using intimate and domestic narrative frames to represent large-scale political rupture. Scholarship specifically on 1971 war fiction remains comparatively underdeveloped relative to the historiographical literature, with most sustained literary attention going to a small number of frequently anthologized Bengali-language texts and to cinematic representations, leaving English-language fiction of the war including Bose's novel comparatively unexamined.

### 3.3 The Gap: A Missing Literary Reading of Bose's Fiction

Under Such a Sheltering Sky has received little to no sustained literary-critical treatment to date, despite the considerable scholarly attention paid to Bose's nonfiction. This is a significant gap for two reasons. First, the novel's dual-focalization structure narrating the war through both a Bengali family and a sympathetically drawn West Pakistani officer makes a distinctive intervention into a literary field that has tended to organize itself along national lines, and this structural choice has not been analyzed as such. Second, because the novel is written by an author whose prior historical work is itself a documented and disputed intervention in the historiography discussed above, reading the novel in isolation from that context would miss precisely the kind of relationship between text and co-text that New Historicist method is designed to examine. This study addresses that gap by reading the novel's narrative strategies as a text that itself participates in, and can be situated within, the same contested field of memory its author's nonfiction previously entered.

## 4. Textual Analysis

This section applies the theoretical framework developed above to Under Such a Sheltering Sky, organized around the three research questions: how the novel's dual focalization constructs competing discourses of the war; what the novel's selective representation reveals about its historical positioning; and how domestic space functions as a site where political power and personal loyalty are negotiated.

### 4.1 Dual Focalization: Constructing Competing Discourses

The novel's central formal choice is to divide narrative sympathy between Milon, a young Bengali nationalist, and Captain Sameer, a West Pakistani army officer posted to Narsingdi. This is a significant departure from the national framing that dominates most 1971 war narratives, in which the war is typically focalized entirely through one side's suffering. By granting Sameer interiority his boredom, his professional frustration, his eventual entrapment between orders and conscience the novel resists collapsing him into an anonymous instrument of state violence, even as it does not exonerate the institution he serves.

This structural choice does ideological work that the novel makes almost explicit in a single authorial aphorism embedded in the narrative:

*“One man's freedom fighter is always another man's terrorist.”*

The line functions less as a character's realization than as an authorial intrusion a moment where the text steps outside its own fictional frame to state its organizing premise directly. Read through Montrose's account of the textuality of history, this line is significant precisely because it names, rather than conceals, the novel's central historiographical claim: that 1971 does not yield a single settled narrative but a set of positioned ones, and that the novel's structure not just its content is itself an argument for that plurality. This is the clearest point in the text where form and thesis converge, and it is worth treating as the novel's own statement of method, comparable to Bose's stated aim in her nonfiction to counter what she called the narrative of the victorious side. The recurrence of that authorial project across her history and her fiction is precisely the kind of continuity New Historicist reading is positioned to notice without needing to adjudicate its accuracy.

#### 4.2 Selective Representation: Foregrounding, Compression, and Silence

Following the New Historicist premise that a text's silences are as significant as its inclusions, this section examines what the novel renders in close, humanized detail against what it compresses into summary or omits.

The novel dwells at length on Milon's capture and interrogation by Sameer, and later on the reversal of that relationship when Milon's family shelters the same officer. This reciprocal structure captor becomes guest, victim becomes protector is the novel's most sustained set piece, and it is treated with considerable narrative patience. By contrast, the novel's treatment of mass civilian violence is comparatively brief and impressionistic, rendered through fragments of overheard report rather than sustained scene:

*"The streets are littered with dead bodies... Artillery bombardment appears to have severely damaged the university."*

This line arrives as reported observation, at a narrative distance from the immediate consciousness of either protagonist, in contrast to the sustained interiority given to Sameer's and Milon's personal ordeals.

A similar pattern appears in a brief exchange in which characters try, and fail, to identify the source of the violence around them:

*"Some of the People are at Parade, said Milon... She claimed that it appeared to be an army operation. The air force isn't participating, in my opinion."*

The uncertainty voiced here characters straining to identify who is doing what to whom can be read two ways. It can be read mimetically, as a realistic rendering of the fog and misinformation civilians experienced during the crackdown. But it can also be read, in New Historicist terms, as the text formally enacting its own historiographical caution: the novel repeatedly stages epistemic uncertainty about scale and responsibility at exactly the points where the historical record itself is most contested. Whether this is a deliberate authorial strategy of restraint or a symptom of the same minimizing tendency identified by critics of Bose's nonfiction is not resolvable from the text alone and flagging that interpretive uncertainty is itself the more defensible critical position than resolving it either way.

The novel's most sustained set-piece of direct historical narration is its rendering of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's speech, staged with attention to oratorical performance and crowd response:

*"Brothers of mine... Do you trust me, he asked. They did... Nobody was to pay taxes. (Roars of approval.)"*

This scene is notable for its formal register: it borrows the rhythm of reported political oratory, complete with parenthetical crowd reaction, giving the speech documentary texture within a fictional frame. This is the textuality of history enacted at the level of style the novel briefly adopts the formal conventions of historical reportage, blurring the boundary between novelistic scene and historical record.

#### 4.3 Domestic Space as a Site of Power

The novel's most sustained engagement with the negotiation of political power occurs not on the battlefield but inside Milon's family home, where the family must decide whether, and how, to shelter the man who had earlier held and interrogated their son. This decision is rendered through the texture of ordinary domestic activity a family meal, cigarette smoke thick in a room, quiet arguments about logistics rather than declarations of ideology:

*"The room was so thick with the cigarette smoke that Milon's eyes stung... your men must have told you."*

The banality of the setting is doing significant work: political and military power, elsewhere embodied in troop movements and army communiqués, is here relocated into the register of hospitality, risk, and family obligation. Following the New Historicist interest in how power circulates outside formal institutions, this scene positions the household not the front line as the site where the war's central ethical question, what is owed to an enemy who has become vulnerable, is actually worked out.

This domestic negotiation of state violence culminates in the novel's closing surrender scene, where the same juxtaposition of the momentous and the mundane recurs:

*"Indian soldiers were on guard, but it all seemed remarkably casual... we have orders to shoot at sight! Good night!"*

The incongruity between the historic weight of the moment the surrender that ends the war and creates Bangladesh and the almost offhand register of "Good night!" is characteristic of the novel's method throughout: large-scale historical rupture is consistently refracted through small, human-scaled, often understated moments rather than rendered as spectacle.

#### 4.4 The Novel's Title: Utopian Escape as Historical Commentary

The novel's title is drawn from a song Sameer sings to a Bengali woman, Isabella, translated within the text as an invitation to a place "where there is no sorrow / Nor any tears / But love alone blossoms." As the novel's namesake image, this lyric functions as the text's central symbolic counterpoint to its historical subject: it imagines a space entirely outside the discourse the rest of the novel is otherwise occupied with nationalist rhetoric, military order, communal violence. That this utopian "sheltering sky" is explicitly unreachable sung, longed for, but never arrived at positions the romantic subplot not as escapist filler but as the novel's clearest statement of what political violence forecloses.

#### 4.5 Synthesis: The Novel as Co-Text

Taken together, these readings support the claim that *Under Such a Sheltering Sky* does not function as a transparent report on the Fall of Dhaka but as a text actively engaged in producing a particular kind of historical

meaning one organized around reciprocity, domestic negotiation, and the plurality of positioned truth rather than around scale, causation, or verdict. Its formal choices are internally consistent with each other and with the explicit authorial claim, voiced directly in the text, that historical truth in 1971 is a matter of position rather than settlement. This consistency is precisely what makes the novel a productive object for New Historicist reading: not because it settles the disputes surveyed above, but because its very techniques of selection and emphasis make visible how one particular narrator has chosen to inhabit that contested field.

## 5. Discussion

This section draws together the findings of the preceding analysis to address the study's three research questions, and situates those findings within the broader historiographical and literary-critical debates surveyed earlier.

### 5.1 Revisiting the Research Questions

On dual focalization, the analysis showed that the novel's decision to grant Captain Sameer sustained interiority, alongside Milon, is not a neutral storytelling choice but a structural argument about historical truth one the text states almost explicitly through its own aphorism about freedom fighters and terrorists. This finding extends existing scholarship on 1971 war fiction, which has tended to treat national framing as a background condition of such texts rather than as something a novel can formally contest.

On selective representation, the analysis identified a consistent pattern: individual encounters between named characters receive sustained, detailed treatment, while mass civilian violence is rendered through compressed, distanced report. This finding is significant read against the historiographical dispute surrounding Bose's nonfiction, where critics such as Mohaiemen argued that her methodology minimized the scale of Pakistani atrocities. The novel's formal compression of mass violence relative to individual encounter is consistent with that critique, but it is equally consistent with a more sympathetic reading that fiction, as a form, is simply better suited to rendering individual than collective experience, and that the compression reflects genre convention rather than historiographical position. This study does not resolve which reading is correct; it treats the ambiguity itself as evidence of how closely entangled Bose's fictional and historiographical projects are.

On domestic space, the analysis found that the novel consistently relocates the war's central ethical and political stakes into domestic, everyday settings. This supports the broader claim, drawn from Saikia's and D'Costa's work on gendered and domestic experience of the war, that intimate space is not peripheral to the political history of 1971 but a primary site where that history was actually lived and negotiated. The novel's method here aligns it more closely with the survivor-centered historiography of Saikia and Mookherjee than with the state-level, diplomatic-history approach of Raghavan or Bass even though, unlike Saikia's and Mookherjee's work, the novel does not center women's wartime experience of sexual violence at all, an absence worth naming rather than passing over.

### 5.2 The Absence of Sexual Violence as a Significant Silence

This point deserves fuller treatment. Given that sexual violence against Bengali women is one of the most extensively documented and contested aspects of the war's historiography (Saikia; D'Costa; Mookherjee), and given that Bose's own nonfiction was specifically criticized for its treatment of this question, the near-total absence of this subject from a novel that otherwise stages the war's civilian cost is a significant silence, not a

neutral omission. Read through Montrose's account of textuality, what a text excludes is as constitutive of its historical position as what it includes. This absence does not, on its own, resolve the question of authorial intent but it is the clearest point of continuity between the critiques leveled at Bose's history and the shape of her fiction, and a future study with more space could productively make this silence, rather than the novel's more visible set pieces, its central object.

### 5.3 Contribution and Limitations

This study contributes to 1971 war fiction scholarship in three ways: it offers what appears to be the first sustained literary-critical reading of *Under Such a Sheltering Sky*; it demonstrates a method for reading war fiction New Historically without requiring the critic to adjudicate the underlying historical dispute; and it identifies authorial continuity between a novelist's historiographical and fictional work as a legitimate and productive object of literary analysis, particularly in cases increasingly common in South Asian literature about 1971 and Partition where historians turn to fiction to continue arguments they have already made, and contested, in nonfiction.

This study is limited to a single text and does not undertake the comparative analysis that would be needed to situate Bose's novel against other English-language 1971 war fiction, Bengali-language literature of the war, or Pakistani-authored fiction addressing the same events. It also does not include reader-response or reception data that might indicate how actual readers Bangladeshi, Pakistani, or otherwise have received the novel's dual sympathies. It should also be noted that *Under Such a Sheltering Sky* is an independently published novella rather than a work issued by a literary press, a fact that does not diminish its value as an object of analysis but that readers should be aware of when situating it against traditionally published war fiction. These are noted as directions for, and boundaries of, future research rather than as shortcomings the present study could have addressed within its scope.

## 6. Conclusion

This study set out to read Sarmila Bose's *Under Such a Sheltering Sky* through a New Historicist lens, asking how the novel's formal choices construct competing discourses of the Fall of Dhaka, what its selective representation reveals about its own historical positioning, and how it uses domestic space to negotiate political power. The analysis found that the novel's dual focalization through Milon and Captain Sameer functions as a structural argument for the plurality of historical truth, made nearly explicit in the text's own aphorism that one man's freedom fighter is another man's terrorist. It found that the novel consistently compresses mass civilian violence relative to the sustained, humanized treatment given to individual encounter, a pattern that echoes, without simply repeating, the critiques leveled at Bose's earlier nonfiction. And it found that the novel relocates the war's central ethical stakes into domestic space, aligning it more closely with survivor-centered historiography than with state-level diplomatic history, even as it leaves the specific experience of gendered violence largely unaddressed.

Read together, these findings support the claim that *Under Such a Sheltering Sky* is not usefully approached as a transparent report on 1971, nor dismissed as either testimony or apologia, but is better understood as a text actively participating in the same contested field of memory that its author's historiographical work has already entered. This is the study's central contribution: a demonstration that a novel's formal choices what it dwells on, what it compresses, where it locates its emotional weight can themselves be read as a historical argument, and

that doing so does not require the literary critic to settle disputes that professional historians themselves have not settled.

This reading does not exhaust the novel, and it should not be taken as a final verdict on either the text or its author's broader project. The absence of sustained attention to sexual violence remains the clearest unresolved question this study raises rather than answers, and a more focused study could productively take that silence as its primary object. Comparative work setting Bose's novel alongside Bengali-language fiction of the war, or against other English-language treatments of 1971 would also test whether the patterns identified here are distinctive to this text or characteristic of a wider body of writing about the war produced from outside Bangladesh's national literary tradition.

What this study offers, more modestly, is a method: a way of reading contested war fiction that treats the historical record's own unsettledness not as an obstacle to literary analysis but as its proper starting point. In a critical field where novels about 1971 are often read as evidence for one national narrative or another, attending instead to how a text formally negotiates that contest as this study has tried to do with *Under Such a Sheltering Sky* offers a way of taking such fiction seriously as literature without asking it to do the work of history.

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