

An Apology for the Literature of the Disappeared

Md. Mahmudul Hasan¹
International Islamic University Malaysia

Abstract

This essay argues that the stories of the disappeared and their loved ones have great potential to be an overarching literary genre. Given the worldwide practice of disappearing the vulnerable for political and other reasons, there is an abounding reservoir of trauma and suffering which can provide sufficient material for artistically representing the experiences of its direct and indirect victims. Since the powerful are involved in promoting and facilitating the crime of enforced disappearance, its victims remain in positions of multiple vulnerability and limited access to the justice system. Chronicling their ordeal in the form of a vibrant literary genre – the literature of the disappeared – will empower them to reclaim agency over their stories. Based on this observation, in this essay I shall argue for the artistic potential and growth of this truly global literary genre.

Keywords

Literature of the disappeared, suspense of half-widows, Aynaghar of the Hasina regime, the disappeared of Kashmir and Bangladesh, agency of the victim

Introduction: The Making of Genres

Literature is typically defined as a mirror of life and a reflection of society. Predicated upon this notion, various literary genres have developed to capture diverse aspects of human experiences and to cater to the taste and interest of the audience. Drama, essay, elegy, epic, eulogy, fable, fairy tale, fiction, hymn, legend, myth, parable, poetry, prose, and psalm are some of the well-established literary genres and subgenres. Autofiction, climate or environmental fiction, digi-fiction, flash/micro fiction, hyperpoetry, Instapoetry, performance poetry, slam poetry,

¹ **Md. Mahmudul Hasan** is Professor of English at International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM) and Editor-in-Chief of *Asiatic*. He completed a PhD in comparative literature at Portsmouth, had a postdoctoral research stint at Heidelberg, and taught at Dhaka University. His work has appeared in publications by Brill, IIT, Johns Hopkins University, Orient BlackSwan, Routledge, SAGE, University of Florida, Wiley-Blackwell, and other presses. Among the books he co-edited and contributed to are *Bangladeshi Literature in English: Critical Essays and Interviews* (2024), *Displaced & Forgotten: Memoirs of Refugees* (2017), and *A Feminist Foremother: Critical Essays on Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain* (2017). He is the author of *Islamic Perspectives on Twentieth-Century English Literature* (2017). Email: mmhasan@iium.edu.my

and romantasy are some of the more recent ones. Among the emerging literary genres that are receiving critical attention today are various types of life writing including migrant, diasporic, and refugee narratives.

Historically, literary genres emerged in different social conditions to capture human experiences of specific times. Various sociocultural and historical conditions worked as pull factors for writers to put in words their own experiences and represent those of others. Thus, while literature contains expressions of individual and group identities and experiences, different literary genres are influenced by social contexts within which writers reside. As, in his book *Reframing Yeats: Genre, Allusion and History* (2013), Charles I. Armstrong argues, “Typically, we think of genre in literature as a distinctively intra-literary affair... [but] literary genres are affected by non-literary ones” (96). That is to say, different literary genres do not emerge on their own but as writers’ creative responses to specific real-life events and human conditions. They are the outcome of writers’ urge to communicate to the audience their artistic take on specific human experiences. Any study of the historical emergence of literary genres will suggest that they are inescapably tied to certain lifeworlds and political-cultural realities.

Diasporic and refugee literature has proven useful as a kind of confessional literature that concerns the liminal experience of being uprooted from one’s country of origin and absorbed into a host society that is often hostile and exhibits racist and xenophobic tendencies to migrant communities. This and other subgenres of confessional literature come under the category of life writing. Partly because of its therapeutic potential, the genre of life writing has grown steadily in the last decades. Through storytelling, many life writers seek to process their past experiences of (extreme) events and deal with future uncertainties and probable risks they anticipate.

However, there is another potential subgenre of life writing with plenty of energy and substance, and its growth is long overdue. It is the literature of the (forcibly) disappeared which, as a subgenre of life writing, exists in parts of the world – especially in Latin America – but has not been mapped adequately. The phrase “literature of the disappeared” has some currency and is mentioned in literary discussions, but not in adequate detail needed to turn it into an established genre. For example, during the 1987 Convention of the Modern Language Association of America that was held in San Francisco, California on 27-30 December, there was a session titled “Literature of the Disappeared: Politics and Writing” (Monday 28 December). It included the following papers: Argentinian poet Alicia Partnoy’s “Disappearances: The Victim as Writer and the Writer as Victim;” scholar of Latin American literature, the late Jean Franco’s “Speaking

about the Unspeakable: Literature of the Disappeared in Latin America;” and Amnesty International official Cosette Thompson’s ““After They Came for You’: Literature of the Disappeared outside Latin America” (MLA 989).

Decades later in an interview with Juanita Heredia in 2015, Uruguayan–American writer Carolina De Robertis discussed her novel *Perla* (2012) that concerns the disappeared in Argentina. She talked about Horacio Verbitsk’s nonfiction work *The Flight: Confessions of an Argentine Dirty Warrior* (1996) “that first broke the news in Argentina about the fact that some people that had been disappeared by the government were dropped from airlines into the sea” (Heredia 76). De Robertis used the term “the literature of the disappeared” in respect of giving “the disappeared a voice” because “through the magic of fiction, a dead person can return and be given a voice” (76-77). However, such on-off occasional discussion on the literature of the disappeared does not constitute a significant body of literary criticism that would help turn it into a subgenre of life writing or an independent genre. Therefore, the literature of the disappeared has not fully evolved and flourished in the literary world. Nor has it been sufficiently explored, evaluated, or given attention to by literary scholars. There have been sociological and anthropological studies of enforced disappearances, but the literature of the disappeared has not developed into an established genre or subgenre. Premised upon this understanding, I shall offer a rationale for establishing and recognising the literature of the disappeared as a separate category of creative expression.

The incidence and prevalence of enforced disappearance

In the discourse of enforced disappearance, the term “disappear” means what in the Spanish language is “*desaparecer a alguien*” (to cause someone to disappear often without a trace); and it does not denote “to disappear or go missing” voluntarily (Zia, *Resisting Disappearance* 4-5). The term first came into currency in the 1960s when this form of human rights violation became pervasive in some Latin American countries.

Before the second half of the twentieth century, the crime of forcibly disappearing people was not a common practice anywhere in the world. Until a few decades ago, this cruel tactic “was applied by a few states aiming at the obliteration of certain groups of people” (Pervou 762). This method of oppression was not considered a routine political tool of intimidation for consolidating power or seeking legitimacy for an undemocratic regime. However, lately it has become a common practice in states that attempt to eliminate political rivals, stifle dissent, and stymie calls for democracy and human rights. A 2009

report of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) regarded this state-sponsored crime as endemic, stating:

Enforced disappearance has become a global problem and is not restricted to a specific region of the world. Once largely the product of military dictatorships, enforced disappearances can nowadays be perpetrated in complex situations of internal conflict, especially as a means of political repression of opponents. (OHCHR, “Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances” 2)

The United Nations (UN) first took cognisance of the crime of forcibly disappearing people during the 33rd session of its General Assembly on 20 December 1978. It passed a resolution that expressed deep concern over “reports from various parts of the world relating to enforced or involuntary disappearances of persons as a result of excesses on the part of law enforcement or security authorities or similar organizations” (quoted in US Congress 104). Subsequently, the UN General Assembly adopted another resolution (no. 47/133) on 18 December 1992, where it says:

Deeply concerned that in many countries, often in a persistent manner, enforced disappearances occur, in the sense that persons are arrested, detained or abducted against their will or otherwise deprived of their liberty by officials of different branches or levels of Government ... followed by a refusal to disclose the fate or whereabouts of the persons concerned. (quoted in Solla 57)

Finally, the General Assembly in its resolution 61/177 of 20 December 2006 adopted the “International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance” which provides a more precise definition of enforced disappearance, stating:

For the purposes of this Convention, “enforced disappearance” is considered to be the arrest, detention, abduction or any other form of deprivation of liberty by agents of the State or by persons or groups of persons acting with the authorization, support or acquiescence of the State, followed by a refusal to acknowledge the deprivation of liberty or by concealment of the fate or whereabouts of the disappeared person, which place such a person outside the protection of the law. (Article 2, Preamble, OHCHR, “International Convention”)

A close examination of the wording of the above UN resolutions on the question of enforced disappearance shows a crescendo of stress in their language. The 1978 resolution used the term “reports” which indicates a possibility but lacks certainty. In subsequent resolutions, the UN used progressively stronger terms to express concern over the state practice of disappearing people and finally, in

2006, ended up adopting an international convention to address this scourge of human rights violation. Despite multiple UN resolutions and greater understanding of the problem, the crime of disappearing people has now ascended from rarity and infrequency to typicality and recurrence in different parts of the world. This is largely because of the impunity granted to those who perpetrate this offence.

The impunity of enforced disappearance

Enforced disappearance occurs under conditions that in most cases do not support proper investigation and prosecution. Nor do they facilitate evidence collection. Since its perpetrators are governments or dominant forces, they are not brought to justice when they are in power, or when they are able to manipulate the law to their advantage or suppress eyewitness testimony. What is more, since this particular human rights abuse is generally carried out by state agents who have means of coverup and concealment at their disposal, it is difficult to prove their involvement beyond doubt, especially during their time in power.

That is to say, the complexity of the crime is exacerbated by two factors. First, it is chiefly committed by those who are responsible to uphold the law and to protect citizens from human rights violations. This paradox increases the likelihood and enormity of the crime and renders its victims more vulnerable, while the perpetrators are privileged with impunity. Second, the perpetrators maintain secrecy when committing the crime. They force silence upon the victims and destroy evidence. Since such people do the bidding of the state or powerful groups, they can easily avoid juridical punitive measures. Moreover, within a context of unequal power relationship, it is not difficult for a dominant group to accomplish the crime of forcibly disappearing members of vulnerable groups. This contributes to the worldwide spread of the crime of enforced disappearance.

Enforced disappearance: A North-South phenomenon

Enforced disappearances “were carried out with unprecedented intensity in Latin America from the 1960s through the 1990s” (Naftali 120). According to Gabriella Citroni and Tullio Scovazzi, Guatemala was the first country that routinely disappeared its citizens between 1963 and 1966. In the following decades, this cruel tactic “spread to other Latin American countries, such as El Salvador, Chile, Uruguay, Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Peru, Paraguay, Honduras, Bolivia, Haiti and Mexico” (Citroni and Scovazzi 90). In Argentina, during different military governments between 1976 and 1982, the number of enforced disappearances that occurred ranged from 10,000 to 30,000 (Ranis 30). However, the

perpetrators were not brought before courts until 1986 (Sabuktay 526) – three years after the last Argentine military dictatorship (responsible for the crime) was toppled in 1983.

Another global South region where enforced disappearance has gained prevalence is South Asia, which I shall discuss later in this essay. However, it is by no means a crime exclusive to the South. Often, mainly owing to its prevalence in South America in the 1960s and 1970s, the practice of disappearing people is associated with the Global South, but the Global North has also participated in the commission and systematic abetment of this crime – through active participation and/or complicity both in the past and in recent decades. During the Battle of Algiers, France gave “special powers” to its paratroopers in Algeria to contain the independence movement that began in November 1954, and by September 1957 the colonial power tortured and disappeared approximately 3000 Algerians (Scully 978). In the recent past, as the events surrounding the so-called war on terror campaign have been unfolding in the post 9/11 decades, studies have been conducted on the practice of disappearing persons by Western governments. In an article titled “British torture in the ‘war on terror’” (2017), Ruth Blakeley and Sam Raphael have discussed allegations that

concern British involvement in the Central Intelligence Agency’s (CIA’s) Rendition, Detention and Interrogation (RDI) programme, which saw a global network of secret prisons built and run by the CIA, wherein prisoners were held for months or years on end without access to legal representation or other contact with the outside world. (246)

Such practices of rendition and detention are comparable to enforced disappearances and question the legality and ethicality of the war on terror that was proclaimed by the US in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks on its soil. It also contributed to an escalation of this practice in such a Global South country as Pakistan where “the incidence of enforced disappearances suddenly increased” soon after the war on terror began (Shafiq 389). While enforced disappearance incidents in Pakistan were believed to be linked to its foreign policy alignment with the US war on terror, governments in some other South Asian countries have chosen to commit such crimes without any incentive or incitement from the Global North, as I elaborate below.

Enforced disappearance in South Asia: Kashmir and Bangladesh

In South Asia, people of Kashmir are the longstanding victims of enforced disappearance. Given that the valley is “the world’s most densely militarized zone” with the presence of “700,000 Indian troops” (Zia, “Enforced Disappearance” 6 and 14) for its roughly 7 million people (with the ratio of one

military person per 10 Kashmiris, as India's heavy military concentration is mainly in the valley of Kashmir),² the act of disappearing Kashmiris by the army is relatively easy to carry out. While for a long time Kashmir remained the hotspot for the crime of enforced disappearance in the region, with time it kept escalating in other Asian countries; and this led to the formation of the Manila-based Asian Federation Against Involuntary Disappearances (AFAD) in 1998.

As regards Kashmir, mainly through the poetry of Kashmiri poet Habba Khatoon (1554–1609), we know about the earliest recorded case of enforced disappearance. Her husband³ Sultan Yusuf Shah Chak – Kashmir's last indigenous king – was unlawfully detained by the Mughal emperor Akbar. Failing to take control of Kashmir through military means, Akbar

invited Yusuf Shah to his court as a friend but put him in exile and imprisoned him at Biswak in Bihar where, in isolation and segregation and remembering his motherland and his beloved queen, Yusuf Shah died a sorrowful death in ... 1590. (Khayal 83)

Although the location of Yusuf Shah Chak's detention is now known, he is regarded as an archetypal example of enforced disappearance in South Asia. Centuries after his disappearance, the Indian state started in a major way applying the tactic soon after Kashmiris – in December 1989 – launched anew a resistance movement known as *Tebreek* against the Indian occupation of their land. According to some estimates, “since the start of armed resistance in 1989, over 700,00 [70,000] people have been killed, and between 8000 and 10,000 individuals remain forcibly disappeared” (Zia, “Enforced Disappearance” 14). In addition to the perpetrators' ascendancy and the victims' vulnerability, the Indian government's practice of enforced disappearance in Kashmir has an additional enabling factor discussed below.

It is true that countries with histories of enforced disappearance provide de facto impunity to the practice by protecting its perpetrators from prosecution or from any form of criminal responsibility. However, India is perhaps unique in the sense that it provides de jure impunity to the armed forces involved in enforced disappearances and other human rights violations. As in a 2008 report, the Human Rights Watch states that India has several legal provisions to shield “its military personnel and civilian officials from legal accountability” (HRW,

² According to the 2011 census, the population of the entire Indian-occupied Kashmir region – including the Kashmir Valley, Jammu, and Ladakh – is 12,541,302 while the valley itself has 6,888,475, Jammu 5,378,538, and Ladakh 274,289 people (Planning Development & Monitoring Department).

³ There is debate about her actual relationship with Yusuf Shah Chak. Some believe that she was his consort (not wife).

“Getting away with murder” 13). In order to quell the Kashmiri resistance movement that emerged at the end of 1989, the Indian government enacted the Jammu and Kashmir Disturbed Areas Act, 1990 and revised it in 1992. This legislation is in addition to the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act (AFSPA) enacted on 18 August 1958, Jammu and Kashmir Public Safety Act, 1978 (modelled after apartheid South African Public Safety Act, 1953), “Terrorist and Disruptive Act (TADA) and several other laws which suppress basic civil liberties in Kashmir” (Mohiuddin 75). All these give Indian armed forces deployed in Kashmir immunity from prosecution for human rights violations in the valley.

Another special feature of enforced disappearance in Kashmir is that the Indian army personnel disappear both the living and the dead. Many Kashmiri bereaved families are denied the right to observe funeral rites freely or to bury their loved ones in cemeteries of their choice. In some cases, only a few family members are allowed to perform *salat al-janaazah* (funeral prayer) and the deceased are “buried in remote, heavily surveilled graveyards,” which Ather Zia calls “enforced disappearance in death” (“Enforced Disappearance” 1). In other cases, the dead bodies are snatched away from the bereaved families and buried in places unknown to them. For instance, when legendary Kashmiri resistance leader Syed Ali Shah Geelani – after enduring decades-long imprisonment and about a dozen assassination attempts – died in 2021 at the age of 92, government agents seized his dead body and hastily buried him in an unmarked grave which was later identified but remained under 24/7 police surveillance; thus, Geelani “remains arrested” even in death (Zia, “Enforced Disappearance” 2). Zia also mentions several cases of extrajudicial killing in Kashmir in the name of (fake) encounters, and in almost all cases the bereaved families were not given the bodies of the deceased which were hastily buried under tight surveillance. This practice is exemplified by the fact that there are “2,700+ mass graves and unidentified graves across three districts in Baramulla, Bandipora, and Kupwara in North Kashmir” (4). Notably, the forms and methods of human rights violations in Kashmir seemed to have been replicated in Bangladesh during the 15-year (2009–2024) rule of Sheikh Hasina.

In recent years, Bangladesh attracted much media attention due to the resurgence of enforced disappearance after a decades-long break. The first few years (1972-75) of independent Bangladesh under Sheikh Hasina’s father Sheikh Mujibur Rahman were marked by “extra-judicial killings, enforced disappearances, torture and arbitrary arrests,” with the victims being mainly political opponents (Hashmi 115). The second Hasina government came to power in Bangladesh in early 2009, and the first recorded incident of enforced disappearance on her watch took place in mid-2010, which I will elaborate later

in this essay. Previously, flood, *hartal* (general strike), and street protests used to be the usual headline-making events in the country. However, during the last Hasina regime, the suffering in silence of those who were disappeared and the distress of their family members featured prominently in Bangladesh. The country began to slide into an autocratic system significantly in 2011 (Riaz 25). As the ruling party turned into a personalistic political group centred on Hasina, Ali Riaz and Sohel Raza regard this particular steep descent into misrule as a “personalistic autocracy” under her (55).

One devastating outcome of Hasina’s autocratic overreach was a high incidence of enforced disappearance. Even though Ali Riaz marks 2011 as a landmark year in the precipitation of autocracy under Hasina, she began oppressing her opponents soon after coming to power. And the “disappearance of Dhaka City Corporation councillor [and BNP leader] Mohammad Chowdhury Alam on June 25, 2010” was the first such widely reported incident under Hasina’s rule (Hasan, “The Rhetoric”). The second high-profile victim of enforced disappearance during her time in power was another BNP (Bangladesh Nationalist Party) leader, Ilias Ali, who along with his driver Ansar Ali was forcibly disappeared in Dhaka on 17 April 2012. The list of victims – reported, under-reported, and unreported – continued to grow and reached an estimated number of 3,500 by the time Hasina fell and fled to India on 5 August 2024 (HRW, “After the Monsoon Revolution”). In cases, “bereaved family members were given an opportunity to receive the remains” of the victims of enforced disappearances and extrajudicial killings “only after agreeing to say in public that their loved ones died of heart attacks, strokes, or other health complications” (Hasan, “Are Bangladeshis”). By the time the Hasina government was overthrown by a youth-led mass uprising, her tactic of enforced disappearance practically gained normalcy in Bangladesh. Had she been in power longer, the list of the victims of this crime would have grown exponentially with greater frequency, severity, and (more prolonged) suffering of Bangladeshis.

Unlike India, Bangladesh does not have any statutory provisions to grant immunity to the security forces that did the Hasina government’s bidding by carrying out enforced disappearances. Therefore, the authorities followed strategies of cover-up, denial, and intimidation to sweep incidents of enforced disappearance under the rug. Even though a *New York Times* report of 16 December 2024 reveals that Sheikh Hasina “orchestrated mass disappearances” during her time in power, when certain incidents of enforced disappearance were first reported in the media, she used to show a lot of performative sympathy to the family members of the victims. For example, a couple of weeks after security forces disappeared Ilias Ali, a meeting was arranged between Hasina and the wife

and little children of Ali where an ostensibly sympathetic Hasina made a tearful appearance on camera and stated that “humanity is way above politics” and assured them that her government was “trying its best to trace him, and requested them to assist law enforcers by giving all information they have” (*The Daily Star*).

There is another difference between the enforced disappearances in Kashmir and Bangladesh. While none of the disappeared Kashmiris has ever returned, Bangladeshi disappeared during the Hasina regime were of various categories. Like Chowdhury Alam and Ilias Ali, most of them are still unaccounted for. Those who returned are of two types. First, after incarcerating them in nondescript facilities and unidentified locations – what are now described as Aynaghar or the Houses of Mirror (ghost houses) – for months and years, fearing possible media leaks, security forces used to bring some victims to law courts which then sent them to prison. Subsequently, some victims were released only after long protracted legal battles. Second, a number of victims of enforced disappearance were released after the Hasina regime collapsed on 5 August 2024. On the same day, rights activist Michael Chakma found himself free after a five-year detention in unknown locations. After being released, he said, “I used to hear the cries of other prisoners, though I could not see them, their howling was terrifying” (BBC). By the way, at one point during his disappearance, Michael Chakma’s family members “held a funeral service for him, certain they would never see him again” (*The Guardian*). Two other victims who were released on that day are Brigadier General (ret.) Abdullahil Amaan Azmi and Barrister Mir Ahmad Bin Quasem (better known as Barrister Arman). Victims of enforced disappearance in Bangladesh – released before and after 5 August 2024 – have now started to speak out and narrate the traumatic, near-death experiences to which they were subjected during their life in Aynaghar. Among the family members of the disappeared, women have been bearing the brunt of much of the hardship as a result of the enforced disappearance of their loved ones. And this has a feminist dimension, as I explain below.

Half-widows and mothers of the disappeared

Victims of this complex form of human rights violation are not only those who are disappeared but include their family members, relatives, sympathisers, legal representatives, and all others who challenge or speak out against systems that enable it. However, the phenomenon of enforced disappearance poses graver consequences for women who suffer both as direct and indirect victims. In Argentina, during the military rule of the late 1970s and early 1980s, pregnant women were disappeared “only to be murdered shortly after delivery” and their babies were distributed among certain families (Penchaszadeh 16). However, in

most cases, victims of enforced disappearance are male able-bodied breadwinners of the family. In their absence, their dependents become vulnerable both economically and in terms of safety; and the onus of financial and other burdens rests on the wives of the disappeared. They suffer from a range of negative emotions including anxiety, fear, low self-esteem, suspense, uncertainty, and in-betweenness. They remain in the suspenseful dread of feeling in a state of being both married and widowed – “partly married and partly bereaved, and the possibility of being either in totality [is] real” (Zia, “The Spectacle” 168). This anomalous psychological condition of the wives of the disappeared has contributed to the coinage of the term “half-widows” which is widely used especially when referring to the wives of the Kashmiri men disappeared by the Indian forces.

As Yusuf Shah Chak’s wife, Habba Khatoon is known to be the earliest half-widow in Kashmir who had to continue “searching for her spouse” (Zia, *Resisting Disappearance* 4). Accordingly, in his review of Zia’s book *Resisting Disappearance: Military Occupation and Women’s Activism in Kashmir* (2019), Mahvish Ahmad states:

[Habba] Khatoon is the iconic ‘half-widow’ of Kashmir, the first in a long line of wives who can neither find their husbands, nor bury and mourn their deaths. Her search for a husband stolen and a home robbed inaugurates stories about Kashmiri women who, like Habb[a] Khatoon, wander their lands to reunite with man and country. (Ahmad 457)

Taking cue from Habba Khatoon’s 1586 verse that laments the enforced disappearance of Yusuf Shah Chak and from her frantic scramble to bring her husband back, Zia discusses the ordeals of thousands of Kashmiri women who have lost their husbands to the Indian government’s scheme of disappearing Kashmiri men since the early 1990s.

In order to assuage the legal uncertainty of the marital status of half-widows, experts in Islamic jurisprudence in Kashmir have stated that a half-widow can remarry four years after waiting for her disappeared husband. However, since the victims are “technically considered not dead,” a shorter or longer waiting period does not diminish the possibility of their return and hence about 91 percent Kashmiri half-widows refuse to remarry (Zia, “The Spectacle” 168). This is despite the fact that the “search for the disappeared in Kashmir has been ongoing concertedly since 1994, and so far not a single disappeared person has been found” (Zia, *Resisting Disappearance* 10). Inamul Haq quotes a Kashmiri half-widow named Sakina as stating:

I was happily married and have two children. One day my husband left for the market and never returned. I waited... then searched... went to the market... local friend’s

place... nearby police station to complain... I told my children their father would return, and I still tell them that their father will return. They have lived an entire life believing that one day their father would return... he neither came, nor has my search ever finished. (Haq 96 [italics original])

In the absence of their husbands, half-widows become socially unprotected and economically handicapped. Since they along with the children and parents of the disappeared largely depend on the generosity of close relatives for sustenance, their continued economic fragility stretches the budget of those who support them. What is more, they become sexually vulnerable, especially when they visit different government agencies such as army barracks, police stations, and prison facilities in search of their missing husbands. Haq narrates the ordeal of sexual abuse of another half-widow who “became a victim of sexual violence when she began the search” for her husband (96).

In Bangladesh’s enforced disappearance cases too, wives of the victims suffer from issues of uncertainty, suspense, half-widowhood, and other forms of concern and tortuous emotions. On the night of 9 August 2016, Bangladeshi security forces took Barrister Arman away “in front of his wife, sister and two young daughters” including then two-year old little Marium Bushra (HRW, “Families Beg for Answers”). Over a long period of eight years from the date of his enforced disappearance to that of his release in early August 2024, suspended between marriage and widowhood, his wife Tahmina Akhtar was in a tragic state of confusion about her marital status. She was caught on the horns of a dilemma whether to remarry or wait for her husband (even though she saw no possibility of his return). Islamic jurisprudential opinion was sought and obtained, on the basis of which she was encouraged by both her natal and marital families to start a new matrimonial life. Her response was largely characterised by a deafening silence, and fortuitously she did not remarry and was united with her husband upon Hasina’s fall (Sumaiya Rabeya, personal communication, 3 December 2025). General Amaan Azmi was abducted from his residence in Dhaka on the night of 22 August 2016 and, after waiting for seven years, his wife Tasnim Anjum Azmi lost hope of his return and remarried in 2023 only to be reunited – following proper legal and religious procedures – with Amaan Azmi after his release from Aynaghar the following year (*The Siasat Daily*). This state of marital in-betweenness is a unique precarity of the wives of the disappeared and further exacerbates their other vulnerabilities in the absence of their husbands. As in Kashmir and Bangladesh, undoubtedly there are half-widows in other areas where enforced disappearance takes place. In all such phenomena, another female group that experiences unfathomable distress, pain, and suffering is mothers, which I illustrate below.

Kashmiri boy Javed Ahmad Ahanger was disappeared by Indian occupation forces in 1990. His mother Parveena Ahanger “ran from pillar to post and did not leave any stone unturned to know about the whereabouts of her son” but to no avail (Peerzada). Subsequently, in order to create awareness of increasingly intense atrocities and the scourge of enforced disappearances in Kashmir, she started a movement which morphed into the Association of Parents of Disappeared Persons (APDP) in 1994. In order to keep remembering the disappeared, APDP members hold regular sit-ins at Pratap Park – the most important landmark meeting place in Srinagar – on the 10th of every month.

There are comparable women’s bodies in other countries too. In Chile, the *Agrupación de Mujeres Democráticas* (Association of Democratic Women) was established in 1973 and the Chilean Association of the Relatives of the Detained and Disappeared emerged in 1974 in order to find disappeared persons (Noonan 96). In El Salvador, *CoMadres* (Committee of Mothers) was formed on Christmas Eve 1977 by “a small group of mothers, each with a disappeared, assassinated or jailed relative” (Norat 38). Like Parveena Ahanger in Kashmir, in Argentina, Hebe de Bonafini (d. 2022) co-founded *Madres de la Plaza de Mayo* (Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo) in 1977 – one year after military rule started in the country and resulted in the disappearance of roughly 30,000 persons in the country from 1976 to 1983 (Howe 43). While the number of the disappeared in a country is sometimes known, that of their innumerable family members who go through harrowing experiences is not. In addition to wives and mothers, children of the disappeared also fall victim to unspeakable trauma. As the wives become half-widows, the children become half-orphans not knowing what to do, where to go, or wherefrom to get fatherly love and support in the absence of their fathers. They are generally looked after by their mothers and grandmothers – wives and mothers of the disappeared. Thus, wives, mothers, and children of the disappeared form a triangular cohort of a vulnerable group, who fight an unwinnable battle against the most powerful people in the land. Such an unequal power relationship is bad enough, but what is worse is that high-level political and military perpetrators of enforced disappearance are supported by intellectual elites in justifying or concealing such gross human rights violations.

Intellectual authors of enforced disappearance

In addition to political actors who order, and security officials who execute, the enforced disappearance of individuals, there are intellectual authors of such crimes. To borrow Murad Hofmann’s words, these “potential perpetrators with pen and paper who hide behind their desks” (164) are complicit in disappearing individuals considered actual and potential threats to the continuity or perpetuity

of an incumbent regime that represents their ideological and material interests. They give overt or covert justification and legitimacy to the state's wrong practices, of which I provide an example below.

In early March 2019, Gowher Rizvi – the then Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's international affairs advisor – appeared on Al Jazeera television for an interview with journalist Mehdi Hasan. By the time this media event took place, enforced disappearance in Bangladesh had become deeply encultured into the norms of the Hasina regime, of which – as a government advisor – Rizvi must have been fully aware. One participant in the interview programme – Abbas Faiz of the UK's Essex University – described the nature of enforced disappearance in Bangladesh, stating that

a group of plain-clothes officers go to the house of the people, they collect them, they take them away and then the police, the security agencies and all of those people, they just say that they don't have any knowledge of them. (Aljazeera)

In response to this concern, Rizvi said:

I think if you are saying, Abbas, that this is a [Sheikh Hasina] government policy, I fear you are mistaken. Government does not need to disappear people. Government have authority to arrest people if they feel somebody has done something wrong. And to remand them. (Aljazeera)

This blatant denial of the occurrence of and responsibility for the crime of enforced disappearance was elicited from this Oxford scholar of some distinction (who has authored innumerable academic publications) at a time when the practice of enforced disappearance in Bangladesh continued unabated on his and other government office bearers' watch. Sadly, it confirms Abbas Faiz's assertion that such human rights abuses under Hasina "happened by the support of people, intellectuals like Mr Gowher Rizvi who [were] actually falsifying the nature of the issue" (Aljazeera). Rizvi was not alone. Many other academics and intellectuals with access to the corridors of power got positions, awards, and honours during the Hasina regime. Unfortunately, fearing the loss of their power and perks, none of those people of letters whom Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o calls "a corpus of state intellectuals" (2 & 102) are known to have distanced themselves from the regime on the question of human rights violations including enforced disappearance. This moral bankruptcy of a section of intellectuals sparked the following rhetorical question that I asked in an earlier essay in relation to human rights violations in Bangladesh: "We all have different political views, but even if a single incident of enforced disappearances or extrajudicial killings were true, wasn't it enough for a conscientious academic to dissociate themselves from the Hasina regime?" (Hasan, "Hasina's Misrule" S17). The short answer to this rhetorical

question is a simple ‘yes’. During Hasina’s 15-year long rule of state-sponsored enforced disappearances and abuses, elite intellectuals like Rizvi continued to enjoy perks and privileges at the expense of the suffering of the people of Bangladesh. Thus, while governments and security establishments were actively involved in facilitating and committing the crime of enforced disappearance, many members of the intellectual elite were complicit in the coverup needed to sustain such practices. Therefore, this complex form of human rights violation urgently needs literary treatment, for which this essay seeks to make a case.

Conclusion: Literature of the disappeared and its subgenres

I began this essay by saying that the development of various literary genres is closely related to experiences of different groups of people. Specific historical circumstances enable the making of genres and creative works. Literary representations of the vulnerable and the oppressed also help create awareness which in turn may inspire responsible action to help remove the causes of injustice. The account of various groups of people – who suffer the consequences of the practice of enforced disappearance – that I have offered in the preceding section suggests that there is plenty of material in the stories of the disappeared enough for the maturation of a potent literary genre.

The primary genre of the literature of the disappeared concerns the experiences of those direct victims who are abducted by state agents and are presumed dead since they remain unaccounted for for a significant period of time. As in the case of Kashmiri victims discussed before, most of them are probably killed by state actors and hence will never return. In order to capture their experience, following the example of Carolina De Robertis mentioned before, creative writers will probably draw on their curiosity-and-observation-driven imagination and mode of representation to depict the plight of the missing. Or, like Horacio Verbitsk, the author of *The Flight: Confessions of an Argentine Dirty Warrior*, perpetrators of enforced disappearance may choose to divulge information about the crime, which will inform writers about the practice. Therefore, collaboration between different groups of people – victims, perpetrators, writers, journalists, artists, and (online) content producers – is needed to collect information and build the genre of the literature of the disappeared.

Some victims are fortunate enough to return and have harrowing and sensational tales to tell of abduction, captivity, abuse, torture, and trauma which would constitute an amazing basis for literary production. Post-5 August 2024 Bangladesh offers enough context and raw material for writers to creatively narrativise the ordeal of the disappeared, as many of the former unaccounted-for

have started speaking about their lives in Aynaghar. However, what is absent from their (mostly oral) narratives are rich literary flavour and artistic excellence and permanence, and this calls for the attention of writers to artistically document the experience of the disappeared.

Subgenres of the literature of the disappeared would include the narratives of their wives (half-widows), mothers, and children. These will concern the tragic state of limbo in which family members of the disappeared find themselves, as Carolina De Robertis regards their experience as “a very unclosed wound” (Heredia 76). They are unsure if their loved ones are alive or dead, which leaves them in suspense and never brings closure to their dream of having their loved ones back or to their nightmare of finding them dead.

Creative representation of the stories of the forcibly disappeared who have been incarcerated and tortured in secret locations and the ordeals of their family members – children, parents, spouses, and other close relatives – who have been in an endless battle to find the disappeared may not yield immediate justice for the victims. However, it will help restore what Ather Zia calls the “subaltern agency” of those who have “no recourse to ameliorate” their suffering (Zia, *Resisting Disappearance* 180). What is more, such an artistic venture will help the experience of the victims acquire a certain degree of literary permanence. Had it not been for Habba Khatoon’s poetry, would we know such details of her plight and remember the enforced disappearance of Sultan Yusuf Shah Chak – the earliest recorded disappeared person in Kashmir?

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