

REMEMBERING 1971: WOMEN'S NARRATIVES OF THE BANGLADESH LIBERATION WAR AND POST-WAR REFLECTIONS

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ABSTRACT

The Bangladesh Liberation War (1971) which seemingly originated from regional problems in the Eastern half of Pakistan was not an unprecedented event in South Asian history. According to historian, Srinath Raghavan, “The political developments in the subcontinent since the Partition of India in 1947, *logically* and *inevitably* led to the disintegration and partition of Pakistan. The history of the emergence of Bangladesh, then, is no more than the chronicle of a birth foretold.”¹ There was no single pretext, no single cause, no single front, no single enemy. The war was the explosion of anger, hatred, and fear that penetrated every aspect of people's lives. No space could provide shelter against the ubiquity of danger. There was no longer any difference between the experiences of the home and the street, the private and the public domain. This war has been variously described as economic, religious, political, civil and ethnic: economic because of the rapidly growing poverty and deprivation of the population living in East Pakistan, which was tightening its hold on the bourgeois center of power; religious because of widespread dissatisfaction among the two dominant religious communities (Hindus and Muslims) that proportional representation was no longer equitable; political because from a Pakistani perspective it was perceived as a war of secession, with India playing an instrumental role in instigating Bengali separatism and for using the ensuing crisis to vivisection Pakistan; civil and ethnic because it was a crisis which involved local militia who were supported militarily and financially by Pakistan, widening the gap between the Bengali and non-Bengali identity.

The current historiography of the Liberation War is focused primarily on the investigation of political issues, the military aggression between armies and militia of West Pakistan, East Pakistan, and India and the contexts of clashes between the different ethnic groups of Bengalis,

¹ Srinath Raghavan, *1971: A Global History of the Creation of Bangladesh* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013), 6.

Biharis and West Pakistanis. The inner conflicts within the communities which led to widespread violence against women have often been conveniently overlooked and women's experiences and memories of the war have been rendered invisible in the official history of 1971. The lived experiences of oppressed groups, particularly women have been retold in an extremely selective and reconstructive manner often leading to distortions and shifts from reality. In many ways, the male narratives and memoirs of the Bangladesh Liberation War are concerned with addressing certain fundamental questions which express a need to rationalize and periodize the events of 1971 – the attack on the intelligentsia, the nature of civilian responses, the political and military organization, the differences in reactions of the Left organizations, the encroachment on human rights and liberties – these are some of their primary concerns.

The exclusivist approach adopted by state-sponsored narratives and historical accounts has especially affected the private histories of women in Bangladesh during the period of the Liberation War. There is a deliberate absence of the traces of trauma and victimhood undergone by women in popular discourse because a culture of denial and shame shrouds rape. In examining the intersections of gender and war, Miriam Cooke observes that “Gender analysis reveals that the execution of mass, legitimized, psychotic violence depends on a particular way of constructing and maintaining gender identities.”² It is crucial to look at the way gender is located among the participants of the war, as well as its victims. The Liberation War of Bangladesh cannot be placed as a determinative event in our memory if gender violence is obfuscated as a category of analysis. The histories of women once again will be obliterated.

A curious case of collective amnesia is at play, where the war narratives are legitimized based on constructed, ethereal victims and even individual memory is riddled with a sense of discomfort while recollecting a past trauma. The shadows of victimhood legitimize action but require that actual victims remain behind the scene. Nayanika Mookherjee in *The Spectral Wound, Sexual Violence, Public Memories and the War of Bangladesh 1971*, evokes the ‘comb’ metaphor to address the issue of public memory and secrecy. Revelation and repression occur at the same juncture according to Mookherjee and the ‘wound’ or injury assumes a spectral quality.

Mookherjee observes that there is a distinct shift in attitude towards the reception of the ‘birangona’ in recent times, which has caused an unprecedented change in the politics of public

² Miriam Cooke, *Women and the War Story* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 48.

memory and cultural representation. Although the 'birangona' is still located outside kinship structures, the physical wound or 'rape' in the 1970's has come to be perceived as a social injury in the 1990's. The 1992 Civil Movement following the creation of the 'Ekattorer Ghatak Dalal Nirmul' Committee (1991) chaired by Jahanara Imam initiated a process of public trial or 'gono adalat' where three 'birangona's' came forth with their account. The publication of the Government Gazette (1991) listing the names of women Muktiyoddhas and inducting two women intellectuals: Saleena Parveen (journalist) and Meherunessa (poet) in the category of 'shaheed' also marked a significant turn in public consciousness. The reconstruction of collective memory, which has comfortably escaped the representation of these women is problematic since the canon of historical narratives and records perform normative value functions by occupying the forefront of our living memory. Yet moral concerns and ontological dilemmas remain profoundly unresolved.

The omission of women's experiences has not only conditioned the 'birangona' issue but it has also pervaded the representation of mothers who lost their sons in war. The title 'shaheed janani' bore the aggrandized image of the despairing mother who had sacrificed her sons for the cause of the nation. What appeared less grievous since it did not involve the public shame or 'lanchana' associated with a 'birangona', nevertheless, allowed the experiences of a different kind of violation. The violation of motherhood and the domestic trauma of losing a child were issues which were largely overlooked in the process of creating larger than life representations of the self sacrificing 'janani'. Their suffering was publically told and displayed and their demands for justice articulated, but their profound anxieties such as the feeling of being abandoned, the disempowerment associated with the loss of motherhood and the disruption of the motherline were unavailable in the absence of personal narratives and testimonies. The testimonies and memoirs of the 'shaheed janani' also extended the consciousness of the few to the many but these were excluded from history because of their irrelevance to mainstream concerns. Instead, cultural historians devoted their reading and writing energies to national, 'masculine' concerns.

In piecing together the aspects of their life during the war, the memoirs of Bengali women (the 'birangonas' and 'shaheed jananis') recreate the past through the dynamics of a conversational remembering within their social group as opposed to national/historical records or the transnational circulation of war memories through reports. As compared to fiction, the memoir

unfolds the memory of people who actually lived through the event and constructs a sense of the past from the most mundane, every day experiences. It is interesting to investigate the emergence of a coherent pattern in the realms of silence and of remembering which emerges in the memoirs written by women authors. The memoir is located in a complex psychological space since it simultaneously reveals the social shape of individual memory and the individualized aspects of a collective memory. The individual remembers by placing himself in the perspective of the group but also affirms that the memory of the group manifests itself in individual memory.

This thesis seeks to argue that the memoirs of Bengali women play a strategic role in the unfolding of a collective memory and a dynamic social history. They provide a distinct viewpoint which is refracted through conflicting prisms and contrary to the accounts written by the contemporary male historians and authors. It is not simply a gender ideology which is expressed through their works but the ‘micro’ aspect of a tearing apart reveals the immensely traumatic ordeal of an injured and massacred population. Women’s narratives are tremendously valuable tools for identifying the needs of women during and after periods of violent conflict and, indeed, for transforming conflict itself. Therefore, this thesis will make an effort to document and read the stories of women who are not only victims but are also agents of change amid the ruins of their war-torn societies.

These critical concerns have been explored in the following chapters of the thesis through a detailed study of the primary texts. In the first section, Nilima Ibrahim’s *Ami Birangona Bolchi* (1996) which consists of the oral narratives of seven birangonas and a recent collection, *Rising from the Ashes* (2019) which has collected the experiences of twenty two women who survived rape, eviction and displacement during the war have been critically discussed. Reading the narratives of women, who were marginalized or silenced, can yield alternative voices, painting a fuller picture than simplified rhetoric. It can enable participation in the narrative process which is important for a range of reasons, primarily to gain deeper understandings of different perceptions of history and to seek justice and healing on both the personal and community levels.

In the second section, the politics of national commemoration and the gendered state ideology have been examined with respect to the ‘shaheed janani’. Jahanara Imam’s *Ekattorer Dinguli* (1986) which chronicles her experiences during the nine month long conflict wherein she lost her son, Shafi Imam Rumi has been closely analyzed. Imam’s diary gives visibility to those

disproportionately affected by armed conflict; these stories must be amplified to eliminate the disconnection between the powerful and the powerless to provide understanding of the dynamics of conflict. The issue of justice for the violation of human rights and war crimes has also been probed into in relation to how they have reshaped women's histories and re-signified the ideology of martyrdom and motherhood.

Finally, the thesis takes into account Taslima Nasrin's *Amar Meyebela* (2002) as an example of a memoir written by a contemporary woman writer revisiting her childhood spent in the midst of the turmoil of war and reflecting upon the present situation of women in Bangladesh three decades after liberation.