

WOMEN, WAR AND CINEMA: CONSTRUCTION OF WOMEN IN THE LIBERATION WAR FILMS OF BANGLADESH

Kaberi Gayen

Professor

Department of Mass Communication and Journalism

University of Dhaka, Bangladesh

Abstract

The focus of this paper is to understand the construction of women in the war films of Bangladesh. Analysed here are 26 full length and seven short feature films made on the Liberation War of Bangladesh (*muktizuddho*), the war through which Bangladesh became independent from Pakistan in 1971. The theoretical framework combined theories of representation, semiotics and feminist film. Results showed that though women had multifaceted roles in the war, like worldwide war frames, the films of Bangladesh were no exception to represent women as passive rape victims and to commercialize rape. They were never represented as freedom fighters. Whatever their roles in the films, had any woman been raped, she either had to die, become insane, or become invisible; she had never been represented as a normal human being. As the years passed by, war films of Bangladesh shows a gradual decline in the active participation of women in the war. Further interpretation has been made why such treatment was given to the women characters in the war films of Bangladesh in the light of critical theory.

Keywords

War films, the Liberation War of Bangladesh, war films of Bangladesh, construction of women characters, theories of representation, semiotics and feminist film, critical theory

INTRODUCTION

According to the theory of representation (Hall, 2000), all texts represent a ‘constructed reality’. With repeated usage, the constructed reality seems to be real. The dominant economic-social-political-cultural power structure constructs the standardised yardstick of judgement, which Marx (1823/1845) commented on in his *German Ideology* as follows – “The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas.” Thus, representation of any event or issue is essentially a selective process – some parts are selectively exposed in the foreground, while some parts are embedded in the background, and yet more are dumped into the historical narrative. In both structural and post-structural theories, the ‘reality’ and ‘truth’ have been considered as the construct of a particular way of representation. Any representation is thus motivated by ideology, and is historically uncertain.

Though the independence of Bangladesh has been built upon the combined struggle and bloodshed of men and women, the mainstream history of its *muktizuddho* has been composed evading the contribution of women freedom fighters and the participation of the overall

women folk of the country. In the 16 volume-document of the war published by the government, no information on women freedom fighters is available. The role of women has been documented as *birangonas*¹. Men sacrificing their lives in the war have been titled as martyrs, while women sacrificing their lives in the same war have been termed as *birangonas*. The mainstream history of the liberation war states that “Bangladesh has achieved the independence from the blood of three million martyrs and the *loss of ijat* (loss of chastity) of two hundred thousand women” (Sarkar, 1998:2). The evidence of wartime torture gave men the honour of *muktizoddha* (war hero), whilst the same evidence of torture has been perceived as women’s loss of honour. Thus, the symbiotic relationship of the power of having control over language and manufacturing the ‘truth’ as stated by Foucault (1969) becomes evident here.

Mass media either works as a helping force to continue the dominant ideology by spreading the language of the powerful, or creates new language to engender new perspectives. The films of Bangladesh have repeatedly addressed 1971. The focus of this paper is to explore how the participation of women in the war has been represented in those war films. The emphasis has been given to the following points:

1. Do these films only represent women as dishonoured, tortured or passive beings, as recorded in the mainstream history, or do they represent women’s glorious participation in the war?
2. It has been explored in two ways: First, if the multidimensional participation of women in the war has been represented; Second, from which point of view the rape and rape victims have been represented- only for commercial purposes or as the part of history of this country’s emergence.

This paper consists of two parts. To obtain a theoretical framework that conceptualises the construction of women in war films, the first part examines the trend of representing women in the world frame. The second part presents the Bangladesh scenario.

WOMEN IN WAR FILMS: WORLD PERSPECTIVE

Throughout history, the role of a soldier is essentially preserved for males. According to Fröhlich (2010) and Tuchman (1979), the overall theoretical framework of covering war in mass media gives evidence that to justify war the political leadership use fragile and susceptible images of women, but strong and powerful images of men. The aim is to establish the moral justification of able men going to war in order to protect vulnerable women,

¹ Birangona (heroine) is the feminine gender for Bir (hero). The December 22, 1971 proclamation of the People’s Republic of Bangladesh declared the wartime rape victims as ‘birangona’. The meaning should be war heroine. The connotative meaning for this word has been established as dishonoured, disgraced and who lost everything.

children and the elderly. Film, like other branches of mass media, also works as the 'ideological state apparatus' (Althusser, 1970/71) to manufacture people's consent.

War films represent a genre where women are rarely placed in main roles. They are normally seen as nurses, mothers, wives, lovers, resistance fighters and of course, frail victims. If ever in a soldier's role, they are not presented as officers. Among all of those roles, they are most commonly nurses. To cite a few are: *The Lighthorsemen* (Wincer, 1987), *In Love and War* (Attenborough, 1996), *The English Patient* (Minghella, 1996), and *Pearl Harbor* (Bay, 2001). However, nurses are mostly seen to satisfy the romantic or sexual needs of male soldiers rather than their professional duties.

In some films, mothers, wives, and girlfriends are seen in the beginning scenes of the story, especially when the soldiers leave their homes for the battlefield, as in *Dark Blue World* (Sverak, 2001) or in *The Ballad of a Soldier* (Chukhrai, 1959). They are seen again when they read letters sent by their loved ones from the battle, for example in *The Thin Red Line* (Malick, 1998), *We Were Soldiers* (Wallace, 2002), to portray the dichotomy of reality of those who are fighting, the soldiers, and those who are not, mainly the women. Finally, these characters may be seen at the end of the war when the soldiers return home. We may remember the ending scene of *The Cranes are Flying* (Kalatozov, 1957), when all the mothers, wives, and girlfriends are reunited with their sons, husbands, and boyfriends at the train station.

A common representation of women is as the girlfriends of the occupant soldiers. In many of the Second World War films, soldiers form friendships with the local girls when they go to foreign lands for battle. We find American soldiers wooing Australian girls (*The Pacific*, 2010), and Italian soldiers courting Spanish ones (*Captain Corelli's Mandolin*, 2001). Though very few in number, women are also resistance fighters in some films, for example, *Charlotte Gray* (Armstrong, 2001), *Uprising* (Avent, 2001), *Sophie Scholl* (Rothermund, 2005) and *Black Book* (Verhoven, 2006).

Women's representation as soldiers is very rare. A few exceptions are: the Vietnamese female guerrilla fighter in *Full Metal Jacket* (Kubrick, 1987), or Lieutenant Jordan O'Neil in *G. I. Jane* (Scott, 1977). Portrayal as an officer is even rarer. *A Few Good Women* (Reinen, 1992) and *Courage Under Fire* (Zwick, 1996) are two exceptions.

Women portrayed as helpless prey to the ravages of war is more common. The worst forms of violence most commonly portrayed in war films are indiscriminate rape and genital mutilation. Examples include *Platoon* (Stone, 1986), *Casualties of War* (Palma, 1989). We see the deadliest form of rape perhaps in *Two Women* (De Sica, 1960).

Though not as main characters, women have been portrayed as strong characters in a few war films made on the Second World War: *The Cruel Sea* (Frend, 1953), *The Bismarck* (Liebeneiner, 1940), and *Ice Cold in Alex* (Thompson, 1958). We see some important female characters engaged in espionage, for example, *Oddette* (Wilcox, 1950), *Carve Her Name with Pride* (Gilbert, 1958), and *Charlotte Gray* (Armstrong, 2001).

In war films of Hollywood, male characters are absolute controllers. The role of women as prostitutes is significant and common, equally prevalent is the role of women as caregivers. *Das Boot* (Petersen, 1981) exhibits near nude bar girls, whereas prostitutes dressed as playboy bunnies attach themselves with the soldiers from *Apocalypse Now* (Coppola, 1979).

Youngblood (2010) gave a precise description of the representation of women in Soviet war films. *She Defends the Motherland* (Ermler, 1943) was released in 1942. This film contained the transformation of a simple happy and content truck-driver Praskovia (Pasha) into a hard-core soldier named Comrade P after the German occupation army killed her husband, child and parents. She became the popular face of the poster “The Motherland Calls You”. Olena Kostiukh in *The Rainbow* (Donskoy, 1943) and Zoia Kosmodemianskaia in *Zoia* (Arnshtam, 1944) are some similar characters that fought for their motherland. However, by mid-1944, female soldiers in films began to be replaced by male soldiers, sailors and pilots (Youngblood, 2010).

Besides represented as passive characters, women’s absence, inaction or humiliation remains within the discourse of war itself. For example, we see American soldiers call each other ‘fucking pussies’ in *Platoon* (Stone, 1986). The newly recruited soldiers in this film were addressed as ‘cherries’. In Vietnam War, to rebuke the Vietkongs as communists, American soldiers used to call them ‘red nurses’, ‘prostitutes’, ‘castrating rifle-women’. We get a glaring example of such derogatory language in *Full Metal Jacket* (Kubrick, 1987), where Hartman says:

Tonight, you men will sleep with your rifles. You will give your rifle a girl’s name because this is the only pussy you people are going to get.

In the language of war, the process of making an enemy or ‘the other’ is to transform him into a woman symbolically.

Finally, in war films, like in real battlefields, the male image is glorified, and the female is trivialised, evident via the use language and other sign systems. Thus one may wonder if war discourse itself is Pejorative to Women.

RESEARCH METHOD

This is an outcome of the research project *Construction of Women in the War Films of Bangladesh*, under the Film Archive of Bangladesh, which was completed in 2011.

1) Films Analysed

26 full length feature films and 6 short films based on the liberation war of 1971 were analysed. The films are:

Full length: *Jeebon theke neya* (Raihan, 1969), *Ora 11 jon* (Islam, 1972), *Roktakto Bangla* (Ali, 1972), *Bagha Bangalee* (Ananda, 1972), *Arunodoyer Agniswamkhi* (Dutta, 1972), *Sangram* (Islam, 1974), *Aabar Tora Manush Haw* (Ata, 1974), *Alor Michhil*(Mita, 1974), *Megher Anek Rong* (Rashid, 1976), *Kalmilata* (Khan, 1981), *Aguner Poroshmoni* (Ahmed, 1994), *Hangor-Nodee-Grenade* (Islam, 1997), *Itihas Konya* (Akhtar,1999), *Nodeer Nam Modhumoti* (Mokammel, 1996), *Chitra Nodeer Pare* (Mokammel, 1999), *Maatir Mayna* (Masud, 2002), *Shilalipi* (Akhtar, 2002), *Joyzatra* (Ahmed, 2004), *Shyamol Chhaya* (Ahmed, 2004), *Megher Pore Megh* (Islam, 2004), *Khelaghor* (Islam, 2006), *Rabeya* (Mokammel, 2008), *Dhrobotara* (Islam, 2006), *Meherjaan* (Hossain, 2011), *Aamar Bondhu Rashed*(Islam, 2011), *Guerrilla* (Bachchu, 2011).

Short films: *Agami* (Islam, 1984), *Huliya* (Islam, 1985), *Ekattorer Zeeshu* (Bachchu, 1993), *Shorot `71* (Islam, 2000), *Spartacus 71* (Farooki, 2007), *Emon Deshti Kothao Khuje Pabe Nako Tumi* (Farooki, 2008) and *Narasundor* (Masud, 2009).

The films have been categorised in three waves based on the times represented in storylines: Pre-liberation, liberation and post-liberation eras.

2) Theoretical Framework

The sampled films were analysed on the basis of a solid theoretical ground of narratology, feminist film, semiotics, representation, and critical theory.

Narratology is used as the theory and the research technique simultaneously. Metz (1974) offered the ‘grande syntagmatique’, or fundamental syntagm of narrative film – in which he pointed out six major autonomous components: scene, sequence, alternative, redundant, descriptive syntagma, and autonomous plane. As the focus of this paper is to explore the construction of women characters in the war films, the theory of narratology can contribute the most towards examining through the representation of women characters in the war film of Bangladesh.

The concentration of feminist film theory is to reconnoitre the stereotypical outlook on women in different film narratives and genre. Rosen (1973) and Haskell (1974) explored women’s presence in active-passive images, the amount of time allocated for female characters, and how women are presented as mere commodities.

For Metz (1972/1982), viewing film is only possible through scopophilia. He used three concepts to elaborate his ideas – identification, voyeurism and fetishism. Mulvey (1973/1975) argues that film provides visual pleasure through scopophilia and identification with the on-screen male actors. Mulvey (1973/1975) refers to three ‘looks’ to identify women as sex objects in cinema:

- i) The perspective of the male character on-screen and how he perceives the female character;
- ii) The perspective of the spectator as he sees the female character on-screen;
- iii) The third "look" allows the male audience to take the female character as his own personal sex object because he can relate himself, through looking, to the male character in the film.

The creation of ‘the male gaze’ and ‘looked-at-ness’ of women characters are two focal points of feminist film theory. Mulvey (1988: 62) asserts that “in their traditional exhibitionist role, women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*, and for that in film women are the bearers of meaning, not the creators of meaning”.

The theory of semiology works at the core to the feminist film theory. Barthes (1975) says that film is a coded system, a major portion of which works at myth level. Based on Barthes’s notion of myth, Johnston (1991) developed a view of how classic cinema constructs the ideological image of women. She explains (1991:25), “The sign of ‘women’ can be analysed

as a structure, a code or convention. It represents the ideological meaning that ‘woman’ has for men.”

Semiology and feminist film theory, when used in narratology, provide insight to help understand how women are represented in films. However, to understand why they are represented in such ways, it is important to explore the political economy of representation, which is related with the critical approach of text analysis.

For Hall (2000), ideology and power construct the meaning of a given text. So, those who are the owners of media construct the meaning of what they represent. Hence, to understand and analyse how the given text works to sustain or change the existing socio-economic structure, critical theory is important.

Adorno and Horkheimer (1944/1972), two social theorists of Frankfurt School, first coined the concept of culture industry in their book *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*. The main focus of critical theory can be understood from Adorno’s statement that when art and literature come under the grip of industrial technology, its main job is to ensure the ‘triumph of invested capital’. So, the aim of this industry is to produce and reproduce such products those must confirm the maximum return on invested capital. Two basic characteristics of cultural produce are – standardisation and pseudo-individualisation. The produce of the culture industry confirms the standardised mean taste of the audience, which mass media and other social institutions have already constructed. They try to give the impression that each new product is unique, while in fact it is simply a reproduction – begetting a sort of pseudo-individualism. To understand the political economy of the construction of female characters in the war film of Bangladesh, the critical theory worked as the theoretical ground.

3) Research Methods

From the discussion in the previous section, it is quite evident that women in war film genre are represented within a male-controlled framework. There are three forms of this patriarchal representation of women.

First, the male gaze (Mulvey, 1973/75), which uses the victimized role of women to satisfy male’s sexual desire in wartime;

Second, the creation of an environment to keep women inside the home, in regards to the classical ‘home-outside world’ dichotomy;

Third, the construction of women’s positions, when they are represented as active participants, is another important factor of feminist film theory.

Here, each of the female characters has been regarded as a unit of analysis. While analysing the films, three aspects of representation of women have been taken into consideration: the social identity of the female characters; their extent of participation in the war; their on-screen representation. To explore this part, their images were interpreted.

WOMEN IN LIBERATION WAR FILMS OF BANGLADESH

Five Waves of War Films

The trends of constructing women in the war films of Bangladesh at different time points have been distinguished in five categories:

1. Pre-liberation: The Female Autocrat and Woman against Woman!

The *muktizuddho* was a culmination of events. In the time it culminated, besides political preparation, strong cultural preparation was evident. For film, this preparation was most vividly represented in *Jeebon theke neya* (Raihan, 1969). This film has been considered as the example of a national cinema by the film critics, because it was the most successful attempt in the cine industry of then East-Pakistan to put forward the agenda of Bengali nationalism of the people of East Pakistan against all Islamic Pakistani rule and ideology. The major political and cultural struggles of the Bengalis along with their aspiration to be free from the economic exploitation of Pakistan were captured in this film. The time that has been captured in the film, almost the entire nation was on the streets, irrespective of gender. Women took part in the Language Movement of 1952, the People's Upsurge of 1969, and constantly participated in cultural movements. So, the representation of female characters in this film is important to analyse.

PIX 1



1: Men for War and Women for Care

Pre-liberation War Film Jeebon theke neya (Raihan, 1969). The call all for fulfilling the nation's aspiration to become an independent country could reach the men, the snap in the left shows that all the male characters took oath to free the country from all sorts of repression. On the contrary, the call did not reach the women, and the good women were in home busy giving care to their husbands and family.

The film is a political satire framed within a family structure, where the relationship of an autocratic woman with other family members was portrayed in parallel to the then-Pakistani autocratic ruler and his relationship with the struggling Bengali people of East Pakistan. There are two frames in the film: the home and the outside the home frames. In the home frame, women are mainly busy in their efforts to control the house-keys and children. In the outside-the-home frame, there is a call for a wider politics for the country's autonomy and the freedom of people. All the male members are engaged in this politics, while women are engaged in narrow family politics. Women characters are established here in the traditional way of two distinctive sets of characteristics: strong, evil women; and soft, good, family-oriented women. The latter ones are framed in two roles, the caregivers, and the object of sexual desire.

Thus, the construction of women in the Liberation War films was begun within the framework of ideal women of the pre-liberation film industry of East Pakistan, which was essentially the face of domestic women. Though it was the film that showed the nation fulfilling its aspiration to become an independent country, this calling was not meant for the three women of the film. The framework of sons preparing for the country's liberation war, not daughters, continued in the post-liberation films.

2. Post-Liberation War Films

Wave 1: 'Rape Victim', 'Rape-Commerce', and 'Death of Rape Victims'

As per the classical war film framework, the violation of women was what drove the men to war; thus, the weak position was constructed based on the rape experiences of women during the war. Rape scenes were essential parts of earlier films. For example, in the first film made on the Liberation War, *Ora 11 Jon* (Islam, 1972), the female protagonist who worked in a camp as a nurse, was raped; this was followed by an attempt at taking her own life. The side female character died being raped in a Pakistani bunker. From 1972, nearly all the war films of Bangladesh contained at least one rape scene or attempt to rape scene.

PIX 2



2: Closed Raped Bodies in Post-War Films: Wave One

*In the post-independence war films, at least one close rape scene became a must. The upper photo is a full-screen after rape dead-body. In the beginning scene of *Raktakto Bangla* (1972), returning from the battlefield the male protagonist (a freedom fighter) enters into his home and faces the dead-body of her sister. The audience observes a full screen nude body.*

*The bottom one is from a long rape scene in *Megher Anek Rang* (1976).*

In post-liberation mainstream war films, women's image as rape victims was used for box office business; the extreme cases are *Bagha Bangali* (Anondo, 1972), *Roktakto Bangla* (Ali, 1972), *Kalmi Lata* (Khan, 1981). This image was portrayed as their only participation in war.

PIX3



3: Rape Commerce (Villain-Dancer Composition)

*For box-office turnout, often used were dance scenes with traditional villain-dancer composition of Hindi film. The left scene is such a dance composition in *Bagha Bangali* (1972). The right one is a pleasure scene of *Raktakta Bangla* (1972). It is a pleasure scene of Pakistan Army with local prostitutes in the army camp.*

These women had been portrayed to be ashamed of and essentially attempted suicide, declaring that she was impure and unworthy; only a few women in rare cases returned to a normal life, but only with the generosity of the men in their lives. The evolution of the fate of women as per rape experience is recognizable in Chashi Nazrul's films. In his first film *Ora II Jon* (1972), only the female lead lived as the lead male was magnanimous enough to want her in his life, whereas the supporting actress had to die.

PIX4





4: Raped Women Must Die

'She must die' was the verdict for the raped women from the first film after independence. Here are two scenes of 'Ora Iljon' (1972): the lead actress is attempting poison in the left photo and in the right one the raped supporting actress dies on her fiancé's arms being rescued by him from an army bunker.

In his second film made in 1974, *Shangram*, both the main and supporting female characters had to die because of their rape experience. In his later films (2004 and 2006), the main female characters secured a safe exit by not experiencing rape, but the cameos who had been raped were killed off. Even if the war-children had been taken care of, their mothers had to die or live with humiliation, for an example, *Arunodoyer Agnisakhmi* (Dutta, 1972).

PIX 5



5 : War Babies

‘Where are you taking me? I don’t want to live. I am impure, I lost my chastity. Inside my impure body, there has born another tiny body. Let me die.’

When the raped and pregnant woman was rescued from her abandoned position, this was her dialogue in Aurunodoyer Agnisakshmi (1974). Thus she declares herself impure to the nation.

Wave 2: Short Films of Alternative Trend: Passive or Raped Women

After the brutal assassination of the leader of the *muktizuddho* and the first president of Bangladesh, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the trend of making films on the liberation came to a halt. The directors lost their interest to make films on the war for two main reasons: first, the governments who came into power up till 1990 imposed a kind of state obstacle to release of any such films. Many films could not cross the censor board. Second, those who attempted such films could not utilize iconic symbols of the war: Sheikh Mujibur Rahman’s historic speech of 7th March 1971, the war slogan ‘Joy Bangla’, and the name of the Pakistani army as the enemy force, to name a few. It took eight years to make the next films on the war, not in the mainstream film industry, but rather in the alternative and short film wave that rose due to the 80’s film movement. Filmmakers in the alternative wave tried to bring back the spirit of the *muktizuddho* in films. Despite their extensive efforts, directors could not break free from the practice of patronising the image of invisible, raped or passive women. Compared to earlier films, rape scenes had not been used in these films with commercial intentions. In *Agami* (Islam, 1984), when the lead male character’s three-month pregnant wife was being dragged away to be raped by the Pakistani Army, the end of her sari had been trails over the fields and she grabs at the earth with her hands. Here her violated body symbolized the violated nation. After being raped, she attempted suicide twice, and succeeds on her second attempt.

PIX 6



6: Women in Short Films of Alternative Trends

Women were raped and passive in short films of alternative trend. However, raped woman equalises raped country in Agami (Islam, 1984).

In another acclaimed short film *Huliya* (Mokammel, 1984), although the political activist who got a warrant for his activities to free his motherland and who came to see his mother, the women themselves are mute and passive in this film. Following these two anchoring films, the other short films made on the war also represented women as passive victims, and if once raped, committed suicide or were driven to madness.

In *Nodeer Nam Modhumoti* (Mokammel, 1996), the lead female character Rahela became schizophrenic following rape, and the same happened to Rehana in *Khelaghor* (Islam, 2006).

Wave 3: Women Set in Classical Gender Role

After 1975, popular writer and an independent filmmaker Humayun Ahmed was the first to release a film in the mainstream cine industry based on the war. His *Aguner Poroshmoni* (1994) broke a silence of 19 years. The film bagged national cine awards in almost every category. In this film he set a new trend of representing women in war. War did not throw women of this film outside their natural habitat. The lead female did all sorts of whimsical things in 1971's occupied Dhaka, having fallen in love with a freedom fighter who took shelter in their home. The writer-director successfully broke the trend of representing women as raped or tortured, rather he portrayed women characters in two ways: first, silly girls who are passionate and inquisitive about the war of independence. Their involvement in war is restricted to their fantasies; second, mothers who pray for their son's safety either when they go to the battlefield or when they suffer from wounds. Thus, the mother-son framework as the grand narrative of the war got re-established and as per the classical war film tradition, women turned out to be insignificant once more and were placed back into their domestic roles.

PIX7



7: Women Set Stable in Classical Gender Role

Ratri: Will you take me to war?

Bodi: Ha, ha, ha

Ratri: Don't laugh, I have much courage...

War did not throw women of this film, Aguner Poroshmoni (1994) outside their habitats; they could sing and dance in the moonlight or the rain whilst having green mango chutney. Women were set in home with classical gender role of mother and girlfriend

The success of this film inspired few others. *Ekhono Onek Rat* (Rahman, 1997) and *Hangor, Nodee, Grenade* (Islam, 1997) are two of this kind of attempts, where the role of mothers in the narratives established mother-son frame of the war.

Wave 4: Filmmakers of the Alternative Trend in the Mainstream

The alternative film directors took interest to make mainstream films from the early years of the millennium and majority of those films for the mainstream cinema were also based on the war. *Matir Mayna* (Masud, 2002), *Joy Jatra* (Ahmed, 2004), *Shyamol Chhaya* (Ahmed, 2004), *Khelaghor* (Islam, 2006), and *Rabeya* (Mokammel, 2008) are films of this category.

Humayun Ahmed initiated the decline of female participation in the war in mainstream cinema with his *Aguner Poroshmoni* (1994). The contribution and participation of women in war films started to fade away further in the hands of directors of alternative films once they started to make full-length films. Among those films, *Matir Mayna* (Masud, 2002) was the most critically acclaimed. It was Bangladesh's first film to compete for the Academy Award

for Best Foreign Language Film. Though the lead female character was strong, the war did not touch her until the Pakistani army burns down her house. She leaves her husband behind, and runs away with her son. Though quite conscious about the political situation of 1971, she tells her brother-in-law, a political activist, “I don’t have any war.” This absence is established in other films as well. They are simply passive attacked characters, helpless prey to the situation.

The war that women faced in the post-millennium alternative film directors’ war films of Bangladesh seems presented from a distant lens than that of historical narrative. The participation of women in the war does not get any shape, rather the women characters are encircled in the ring of passive participation with the feeling of ‘lost existence’. Although breaking out of ‘the rape commerce’ framework of the ’70s and ’80s, these directors seem unclear as to where to place their female characters.

Wave 5: ‘Chastity’ in Commercial War Films

Besides alternative filmmakers’ war films in the mainstream cinema, commercial film directors eventually started to make films about the liberation. This was their second wave filmmaking about the war. The first and the most successful director in the first wave was Chashi Nazrul. He returned with his second wave of war films. In his first film *Ora 11Jon* (1972), women characters were bright and they were presented as versatile characters. But in his post-millennium films *Megher Pore Megh* (2004) and *Dhrubotara* (2006), there is no sign that the women characters had the slightest concern a general citizen would have during wartime. At best, women were seen fleeing to protect their lives and their *ijjat*. Even absent is their contempt or resistance if attacked by enemy soldiers.

As time passed by, the representation of women as victims of war was being replaced in the commercial films of recent times with the visible attempt to keep women’s chastity intact, this trend started from *Aguner Poroshmoni* (Ahmed, 1994).

In recent films, the rising trend is to keep the main female protagonists out of rape experience, while the raped side characters must cease to live or suffer from schizophrenia.

Instead of solely representing women as sex objects in the eyes of enemies, the new wave is to sexualize them regardless of their roles and positions throughout the film. This usage is most prominent in the last two big budget films about the liberation war, *Meherjaan* (Hossain, 2011) and *Guerrilla* (Bachchu, 2012).

PIX8



8: New Trend of Chastity: ‘Looked-at-ness’ throughout the film replaces rape scenes

In big budget films (Meherjan 2011; Guerrilla, 2012) the new trend is to keep the lead actress away from rape experience and replace those scenes with her looked-at-ness. The scene in the left is from Meherjan, where the gaze of the lead male character on screen leads the audience to the looked-at-ness of the lead female character throughout the film. The same

is in Guerrilla, the lead actress escaped rape experience and replaced that experience with her looked-at-ness.

Wave 6: Women in Women Directors' War Films

At the core of feminist film analysis, important is how women filmmakers and scriptwriters construct female characters. For clear historical reality, the number of female directors is very small, both in mainstream and alternative films. Interestingly, only two or three female directors, who have come to attention, made films based on the *muktizuddho*.

Shameem Akhtar, in her debut film *Itihas Konya* (1999), standing against the commercial representation of the torture on women and the issue of war children in the mainstream films, presented these two issues as essential parts of the war. The story revolves around the issue of war children. The whole narration is represented in females' perspective. Here the person who narrates is female, the person who questions is female, the person who complains is female, the person who is brought into question is female; the questions that are raised are in light of constructing the history of their experiences. The narrative of this film is unique in another sense – when the truth of her conception is revealed to the war child Anonya, she does not destroy herself like other films; instead she finds it more important to work on the Genocide Project.

The only area where the director could not get over the traditional view is the future of rape victims. Kanika, the rape victim, mother of the war-child Anonya, committed suicide. The other rape victim Kanak was represented as barely living. Kanika's rape experience and suicide and the war child issue of this family also remained in strict silence. However, in the representation of Kanika's suicide after rape and the abnormal life of rape victim Kanak, the director could not move past the treatment violated women received in other films. Shameem Akhtar's second war film *Shilalipi* (2002) is based on the life of the only state-recorded female intellectual martyr, Selina Parveen. Thus the director actually represents the life of a female freedom fighter.

However, the experience with female directors is not generalizable. The controversial film *Meherjaan* (Hossain, 2011) is such an example. Though from the director and production of the film had claimed it to be a feminist re-interpretation of the war, on one hand it has been blamed by many (Ferdous et al, 2001; Islam, 2011; Khan, 2011) as a distortion of history, and on the other hand it was considered derogatory for women by critics.

In this film, there are three female characters- Meherjaan, the lead female and her two sisters. Meherjaan, a sweet eighteen year-old girl who falls in love with an enemy soldier after he rescues her from imminent rape by the members of his own troop. As per the classical framework of the Dhaka film industry, the heroine falls in love with the man who rescues her from her rapists. Meherjaan's presence throughout the film is essentially for business as evident from her 'looked-at-ness'. Though claimed to be a feminist film, the young female characters have been presented in the perspective of the male gaze only, for commercial purposes. There are two other insignificant female characters – Meherjaan's mother and aunt, who are occupied with household chores and are not seem particularly bothered about the war. From both the perspective of content and treatment, the construction of female characters

is nothing but the mere selling of female sex appeal to maximise invested big capital, and to do so the main female protagonist needs to be ‘pure’.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION: WOMEN COULD NOT BE FREEDOM FIGHTERS!

PIX 9



9: Women Couldn't be Freedom Fighters

This is a poster of a war-film festival in Bangladesh, which truly portrayed the condition of women in the War of Independence 1971 and their representation in war films. In the total episode they were just hung.

Let's come back to the main question. How women are constructed in the war films of Bangladesh? In the war films, as throughout the history of independence of Bangladesh, women could not be heroes; they could only be the *birangonas*, the connotation of which is now the raped women and thus 'dishonoured, disgraced, fallen' women.

Except for *Guerrilla* (2011), women's participation as direct freedom fighters is totally absent in war films. The nation had to wait for 40 years to get an on-screen female freedom fighter. Besides raped victims, other characters in which women are represented include caregivers under male doctors in medical centres (*Ora 11 Jon*, *Sangram*, *Megher Onek Rong*), prostitutes (*Roktakto Bangla*, *Bagha Bangalee*), shelter-givers to freedom fighters (*Kolmilata*, *Aguner Poroshmoni*, *Hangor-Nodee-Grenade*), and informers (*Ora 11 Jon*). The roles of these side-characters are limited to a handful. The screen-time these characters receive is also short.

All the sources of history, national and international, say that women were tortured in mass numbers in 1971. Bringing out that truth into the narrative of history rather than suppressing, not only for mainstream history but also for films, is courageous. So, there is no controversy regarding why the experience of rape was portrayed in war films, but the questions are, why

rape scenes were used for commercial purpose or why was the issue of rape deemed as only the woman's disgrace?

According to Kabir (1979), some people abused the post-independence film industry as a platform for turning illegal money legal, and, if lucky, make a fortune out of their investment. These directors used rape in film as a tool for their business aspirations. This situation can be explained in the critical theory of mass media. The series of events is basically the same in every film: the *muktizoddhas* are fighting; the women are being raped, where the rape or sexual scenes are constructed under voyeuristic arrangements. There, only the most desirable actors and actresses are being cast in this particular standardised structure of the film industry. Even the makeup and attire in the rape scenes are overly dressy, no less than what is used in an average commercial film. The heroes are masculine as in commercial films; needless to say, the construction of masculinity is even stronger while the construction of femininity is even more helpless. Thus, this particular standardisation and pseudo-individualisation, as coined by Horkheimer and Adorno (1972), confirms the commercial motive of the industry. Securing the business takes place in two ways: first, by using feminine sex appeal, and second, through the confirmation of the much desired image that the raped woman 'lost her everything', which can only be achieved by men and women via the patriarchal structure. The rape business theme in war films during 1972 to 1981 was developed following the 'villain-dancer' and 'villain-victim' framework. The invested capital and its market were national. A basic difference takes place in the two female-focused films of 2011. In these two big-budget films, rather than having them been raped, the female leads were dolled up into mere commodities. The neo-liberal investors are not happy with the distribution system, which is confined within the country. The intended audience of *Meherjaan* is not only the people of Bangladesh. The film was released in Bangladesh only for technical reasons. To capture the market of India, Pakistan and Bangladesh simultaneously, cast were famous actor Victor Banarjee from Kolkata, one of Bollywood's biggest patronising family members Joya Bachchan, and the handsome Pakistani actor Omar Rahim who played the lead male. The presence of Saina Amin from Bangladesh to act the role of Meherjaan was only because it was good for business, abusing her 'looked-at-ness' throughout the film, which cannot be achieved through brutal rape scenes. The physical intimacy of the hero and heroine, which was not the demand of the story and was impossible to take place in a setting the director meant for, was also used with financial success in mind. This big budget film was an example of how the newer expansion of capitalist beauty industry wants to maximise profit using female 'looked-at-ness'. The tendency of using 'looked-at-ness' for business purpose is also evident in the other big budget film *Guerrilla* (2012).

Metz (1974) raised a question if the ideology presented in film and in the audience ideology is the same. His answer was: 'of course'. The nation's history saw its women's rape experience as solely dishonour; similarly, as directors make films to win the consent of the audience, the rape experience was represented as dishonourable. According to Haskel (1974), films reflect the ideological and social construction about women, where women are either revered or denigrated.

Those who used rape for business and those who did not both had suffered from one common issue: What would be the socio-cultural position of these rape victims? The state could not take a position about it. Regarding the social reality of that time, Brownmiller (1975:38) mentioned, "Rape by a conqueror is a compelling evidence of the conquered status of masculine impotence". The winner-husbands of Bangladesh left their wives overnight to rid

of themselves of this symbol of their own ‘impotence’. The raped women did not have many options left other than suicide. But the number of victims was too huge to be wiped out completely. At this point, some films came up with the government declaration of accepting these women by focusing on male magnanimity, *Ora 11 Jon* (Islam, 1972) and *Arunodoyer Agni Shaksmi* (Dutta, 1972) are examples. When these declarations were being conveyed through the films, the arrangements for abortion or giving away the war children to other countries were taking place. So, despite showing the magnanimity of men on cine-screen, the raped women had to erase traces of their experience. Interestingly, the patriarchal film industry in almost each film showed the men as magnanimous characters, while the women perceived themselves impure and committed suicide. There is not a single film where it was shown the reality of the social stigma they had to face.

The rape victims had to die – physically or at least mentally, but the children born out of rape were either sent to Germany to a foster family (as in *Meherjaan*) or got adopted silently in families in Bangladesh. The transition is nicely portrayed in *Megher Onek Rong* (Rashid, 1976). In this film, displayed were rape scenes, suicide of the victim, but the excellent making transformed all those into minor narrative. The film was released at a point in time when the first wave where every director made a war film reached a halt (due to political change) and the *birangana* issue was stomached at the societal level. In the earlier films, the death scene of the *birangana* used to take place at the end of every film, making the audience sad, but in this film the audience’s interest was directed to a newer climax. The baby boy, as if a war child, has to adapt to his new mother after his own mother is raped and commits suicide.

Raped women had to publicise their own impurity through these films. The winner males were magnanimous. But their magnanimity is not always sufficient to change the women’s minds because only through deaths their shame of being ‘impure’ will come to an end, returning to her revered position. The film industry needs the audience-gratification. Lacanian psychoanalysis gives a convincing explanation of how heroes display to their male audience their flawless ‘mirror-self,’ their power of mastery, looks and control on the big screen. On the contrary, for the female audience, reflected is their powerless, attacked ego, which is not at all flawless and thus strengthened are the inferior feelings which already existed within her.

Now the question is why other types of women participation are not represented in film? The world press during *muktizuddho* and the post-independent Bangladesh was busy recording about mass rape and war-children. No other roles of women were documented in the mainstream history. The cine industry and alternative film movement of Bangladesh did not go beyond the recorded mainstream history. Like the mainstream history, the image and contributions of women in the war films are also constructed with negligence, depriving women of their honour as freedom fighters.

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