



THE LITERARY SCIENTIST

A Multi-Disciplinary Journal for Literature and Science

<https://theliteraryscientist.org/>

Volume 1

Issue 1

04.12.2023

Paper Title:

**Gendering Wartime Sexual Violence Against Women in Bangladesh:
The Liberation War and the Struggles of the War Heroines in the
book “*Birangona*”**

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"Birangona"**

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Abstract

As wars occur as a result of conflict and power play between two nation states and rape is commonly used as a weapon of war. Women's body is the landmark of aggression as the concept of the community's honour lies in the women's vagina and the general notion of contaminating the female body is the worst blow meted to a community. In my paper, I am going to refer to Muntasir Mamun's revolutionary book "Birangona 1971" which focuses on the horrific experiences of Bengali women during Muktiyuddho who were abducted and raped by the Pakistani soldiers.

Through the women characters in the book, Muntasir depicts the struggles, gender violence, and trauma endured by women while still supporting the cause of the liberation movements through their voices. But their contribution to the independence movement is neglected in large and overlooked by the sacrifices of the muktijoddhas. In my paper, I will also discuss how sexual violence on women during wars were motivated and strategically put into effect by various power groups as they were approved by the institutionalised models of patriarchy. The Liberation War of Bangladesh is deeply submerged in the pool of gender-based politics, Bengali genocide, mass killings, rapes or forced impregnation, trauma on women by the Pakistani army. This article scrutinizes the relationship between elegance and politics while envisioning war-time rape.

In this paper I will try to present the sacrifices and devotion of women in the liberation war of Bangladesh. In this paper, I would try to critically understand how the women's narratives bear witness to the violence inflicted on them and write from within it a history that could urge an ethical and political thinking in our era of global war violence. I will also try to show that whether the rape testimonies of women in a first person narrative is different from a fiction and whether the narrative is significant as it depicts the alternate truth after so many years of Muktiyuddho.

Keywords: Independence, Liberation War, Sacrifice, Birangona, Honour

The goal of Literatures in publishing stories on wartime rape is to bring attention so that International lawmakers take the matter seriously and penalize them, and the audience can take practical steps to curtail its occurrence. Sexual desires play no crucial role in mass rape as rape is not about sex. Pakistan was topographically and socially divided into West Pakistan and East Pakistan. East Pakistanis were ruled and financially and politically abused by the West Pakistanis. Language played a vital role in the oppression since the Pakistani Government sanctioned Urdu as the official language, whereas Bangla was the first language of East Pakistan. The West Pakistanis were proud of their Punjabi ancestry and the Bengali Muslims suffered from identity crisis that gave rise to Bengali Nationalism. Their denial of subscription to their law led to a bloodbath and immolation of three million Bangladeshi people and rape of four million women.

Muntasir Mamun in his critical testimony on Partition titled "Birangona 1971", shows how History was played out on women's bodies during the partition turning them to passive tormented subject's of history without being able to claim acclamation of their suffering and even 'martyrdom'. As even after so many years of Liberation War, the narrative stands as an aggressive, unconventional example of mass murder, genocide, custodial rape and the victims are retelling their experiences of subjugation to the whole Nation. The main objective of Muntasir Mamun's book, "Birangona" is to portray every detailed story of the torment of Birangona, the reincarnation, and their conquest before the countrymen. These individual stories of ninety nine Bengali women held in custody by West Pakistani soldiers are compiled in a single book, and their experiences from their imprisonment, rape, shelter and unwanted pregnancy, are being narrated bluntly. Unlike the other narratives of Partition, Mamun's book does not narrate events of oppression in the third person narrative, it rather voices the

experiences of the women in the third person narrative where the victims are speaking of their custody.

The narrative surrounding the Birangonas as a victim holds significant value in the examination of power dynamics, the human body, and disability within the context of Bangladesh. The concept of the 'raped' body being seen as defiled, awaiting salvation, led to the domination of genders by the patriarchal narrative. The use of the term Birangona demonstrates the attempt by a conservative Bengali society to create a morally upright state. The deliberate glorification of victims through media and government mechanisms additionally exposes the embedded gender bias within the system. The symbolic portrayal of the Birangona catered to certain expectations of the state, equating the national honour with the female body. Cultural narratives were employed to control and enforce state policies regarding the Birangona's body. Furthermore, rape survivors encountered difficulties in conforming to societal expectations of respectability, as the state attempted to present this ideal through exaggerated cultural representation. (Ghatak, 2022)

In the Bangladesh Liberation War, the concepts of nation and body became intricate, as they were shattered by political unrest and fragmented by nationalist agendas. The brutalized bodies of women who were raped served as a powerful representation of the imminent geopolitical separation of the state. The emergence of Bangladesh was seen by Pakistan both as a geopolitical castration and a blow to male pride and sovereign power. In Bangladesh, women were seen as culture carriers and their bodies were seen as symbols of the nation that men had to defend. The widespread veneration of the nation as a female, particularly as a mother, reinforced the idea of mutilating the state's imagined purity. Both nations, experiencing a loss of 'manhood' through symbolic castration, sought to regain their frustrated pride by negotiating their power dynamics

through women's bodies. The discourse surrounding the birangona as a victim holds significant value in understanding the situation.

Women have been discriminated against all the time in wars. Men are considered as the symbols of masculinity while women are considered as fragile and victims. Thus, in context of wars we imagine a masculine object, a man as a freedom fighter. The patriarchal society and public and social media – all established this concept of war and masculinity.

(Ghatak, 2022)

In this Paper, I will try to focus on how gendered violence is being detailed in a testimonial narrative and how digital media is influential in documenting these stories and this shift from the discipline of social science to literature. The contribution of the newspapers and press is undeniable in publishing these horrific tales of sexual slavery and printing them in testimonial format to make the public aware of the horrific tales of sacrifice. I will also further try to analyze whether reporters and journalists were really successful in documenting these horrific incidents of Partition and the victims were able to gain justice and congratulated for their martyrdom and embraced by the society. As a student of Comparative literature, my duty is also to argue whether oppositional readings encompass the rape testimonies of Gendered Violence and question the patriarchy which failed to ensure safety of women but succeeded in tantalizing them.

The personal and fictional accounts of Partition are being documented in a testimonial format portraying that women's body becomes the field of communal violence produced in literature. As literature is the only field of art influencing and encouraging such literary work to educate the nation about the wrongdoings and injustices meted on their women. But unfortunately, the

gendered violence was unrecognised by Nation's history. Both the social and cultural importance of the testimony along with its vast historiography in literature is very significant and the influence of digital art in the literary field is undeniable.

The after war trauma was more grievous when the country gained Independence but their lives remained unchanged. To make matters worse their condition worsened as they were unwanted and unappreciated by their family and nation at large. The vagina; once considered the honour of the nation, was later mutilated and immersed in a pool of blood. Ripping of their breasts, vaginas, hands and legs by the enemies is an eloquent message of war against the Bengali Community and serves as one man's message to the other.

These women were left with options of Marriage or Motherhood or Abortion, whereas they have already been exterminated by the society. Mainstream Literature is concerned only about the Nation's Independence and is ignoring women's safety and the horrors of Partition especially when it comes to violation of female body. In this alternative narrative, the nation is speaking in the voices of the rape victims who are blatantly depicting their trauma and silent sacrifices. The reporters are bringing various women to the forefront who are willing to share their traumatic experiences which was silenced through honour killings and custodial rape. Self killing was embraced by many women who found it the only way to be heard and escape from dishonour. Their determination to remember and remember their trails becomes a source of empowerment for them. They explored the revolutionary prospects of body making it a site of defiance to challenge the dictatorial power structure and Nation-State. And even in their recovery phase, these women fearlessly took their own decision of embracing motherhood, some found abortion the best option and some deserted their newborns. Even the President of the Awami league, Sheikh Mujibur Rahaman's naming them Birangona could not save them from the slur of being a

Barangona (prostitute) and to make matters worse dehumanise them by denying the basic means of survival. The narrative offers an alternative way of looking at this event and is left with the question whether women deserve this same treatment and expects men to change their outlook towards them.

The state wrapped up the contribution of the oppressed women in 1971 with a word 'Birangona' to uphold the pride and ego of the nation and of the patriarchal ideology. The Bangladesh liberation war, together with the personal struggle of seventy million is actually a combined effort of the Bangladeshis. The history of Bangladesh is incomplete without Bengali women's participation and contributions.

The Liberation war of 1971 is a Gender-neutral War. The Bengali women were attacked in both ways: first because of their Bengali Identity and second because of their Femininity. Their ultimate motive was to attack both Bengali Nationhood and destroy the Femininity.

For the last forty years in Bangladesh, a public memory of wartime rape through various visual, literary and testimonial forms confirmed that the assaulted woman underwent as an honoured figure. The widespread rape in several conflicts have made it vital to 'retrieve' and document human voices of victims in attempting to seek justification for these unsettled genocidal crimes. The assault of women and sexual custody questions their loyalty and their abduction by Pakistani soldiers led to their stepping into the public sphere and their rehabilitation is further criticized by society. The War Heroine thus emerged as a national story of an injury as a result of the rape. The aesthetic foundations of rumour, encounters, photographs and re-enactments brings out the history of rape during the 1971. They also enable to transgress, to delete the complicated course of life of the Birangonas after the war. Through this disentangling of the scenes of dominating

dispute, that the Politics of images and discourses of the Birangona of 1971 can be encompassed as an 'aesthetic activity' going beyond public affairs.

The paper widely examines the way the postwar Bangladeshi media represented the Birangana, how they guided the Government in the rehabilitation of victims of wartime rape, and what media's choice connotes to them. The news reports on the women, represented them as victims rather than heroines, hierarchize their gender above everything, and considered them invisible through the whole testimony. Specifically while fortifying this narrative the media showcased a disparity between the superficial honour of the title of Birangana and its implementation in reality. In oral histories and media, it was evident that women were disgraced and dishonoured. Though they were expected to act normally and bear all the injustices silently.

Their struggle for survival and acceptance in society is being repeatedly discussed in my paper. This paper examines the silence relating to sexual violations by the West Pakistani army on East Pakistani women in the context of the Bangladesh War. During Liberation War in Bangladesh, women were snatched away from their families and their reproductive apparatus was captured by their enemies. The body is vulgar and a visible manifestation of our oppression. The concept of honour of the Nation lies inside the vagina but rape led to the contamination of their bodies. Women are the most endangered beings during the advent of war in our civilization as being used as sex slaves and are passed to random men for sensual pleasures. The attackers employ two types of weapon, genocide and rape. Under Feminist Theory, Men in Patriarchal societies are conditioned to distrust, despise, and dominate women as they are docile bodies. Warrior rapists vent their control on women while enforcing Patriarchal gender positioning from which all men benefit. West Pakistan employed strategic Rape Theory and Biosocial Theory during the Liberation War.

Wartime Rape is a coherent, coordinated, logical and brutally effective means of prosecuting warfare. Mass rape ruins the very roots of the afflicted culture, affecting its capacity to remain coherent and to reproduce itself. Soldiers split the familial atoms of the society by raping women. Assaulted women become pregnant by the enemy and suffer severe physical and psychological injuries, leading to their death, abandonment by families and husbands. The child is shamed as an incorrect child and a proof of their abduction. As we belong to a Patrilineal and Patrilocal society, our identity is understood as the continuation of our father's family and with the lack of father's identity the society considers the child to be born out of recreational sex and thus a threat to the State. The Construction of violence leads to the production of two bodies; Own woman and the Other woman. Violence is appropriated in the name of culture, religion, patriarchy and tradition and these collaborate to inflict torture on the victim. Violence is also pedagogic as it is necessary to interpellate women to maintain their positions assigned to them. Patriarchy often updates itself to inflict women and finds newer reasons to justify those. The male member being the protector of the family feels that he has a certain kind of ownership to the body, as the right to protection gives you the right to injure. He kills her to protect her from any sort of violence in the future and is justified in the name of Honour. (Sangari. 2012, pg 2)

Strategic Rape is also known as genocidal rape as it is collectively designed by the institutionalized government, and is to tarnish and occupy the genitalia of the womenfolk. Rape in war is incidental and not functional as it functions to serve the interests of the collective over the interests of the individual soldiers. Rabeya Khatun, a sweeper working in Rajarbag Police line, gave a statement, "আমাকে পশ্চিম পাকিস্তানিরা বন্দুকের সামনে নির্মমভাবে গণধর্ষণ করেছিল। আমি মৃত্যুর কাছাকাছি ছিলাম এবং তাদের পায়ের কাছে তাদের মলত্যাগ পরিষ্কার করার জন্য আমাকে বাঁচানোর জন্য অনুরোধ করেছিলাম। তারা আমার অনুরোধ উপেক্ষা করে আমাকে ক্রমাগত ধর্ষণ

করেছিল, কিন্তু একজন পাঞ্জাবি সৈন্য আমার শর্তে রাজি হয়েছিল এবং আমাকে ছেড়ে দিয়েছিল।" (Mamun, 1971, pp. 22-23) Women were made to stand naked in the balcony and beaten inhumanely leading to their disfiguring of teeth, rib cages, fingers, breasts and lips. They weren't even allowed to excrete. "Pakistan Zindabad" was etched on their breasts, vaginas so that they look at their bodies and understand that they are occupied. Women were raped through the night and their voices could be heard from miles, "বাঁচাও, আমাদের বাঁচাও, তোমাদের পায়ে পড়ি, আমাদের বাঁচাও, পানি দাও, এক ফোটা পানি দাও, পানি, পানি।" (Mamun, 1971, p. 25) As men were forced to silently witness this atrocity perpetrated on their mothers, sisters and daughters, the retellings of war show them to be similarly mute spectators to the ravaging of nature and the nation. As a result, in both cases, they are shown to have failed in their 'duties' 'as men'. This creates an image of relative trauma — the trauma of those being violated (women/nature) is depicted relationally to the 'trauma' faced by male witnesses of this violation. The dominant imagery was one of the mother (raped woman and mother nature) being wronged, in pain and calling for her (male) children to protect and avenge her (Mookherjee, n.d.). The focus is moved away from the victim towards the men, and it calls upon the men to avenge their mothers and motherland by participating in the war and continuing in nation-building processes of the new Bangladesh. Therefore, by collapsing the image of rape of a woman to the ravaging of feminised nature-aestheticised rape in the public imagination. This combined the images of the woman who had been raped with a mother — in this case, an aggrieved mother crying out for her sons to take revenge — and she was used again as a national figure to encourage the men to join the nationalist cause.

In some cases women were imprisoned which was evident from the testimony of Maloti Ray, a seventh standard girl from Barguna, "বর্বর পাকিস্তানিরা নারীদের জেলে আটকে রেখে একের পর এক

অমানবিকভাবে ধর্ষণ করে। প্রতি রাতে তারা আসত এবং কয়েকজন মহিলাকে বেছে নিয়ে তাদের কামুক আনন্দের জন্য তাদের নিজস্ব বাংলাতে নিয়ে যেত।" (Mamun, 1971, p.26)

Sub-Inspector of Romona Police station, Muhammad Salehajjaman gave an account of the Bihari's persecution, Bengali women were abducted and stripped down on the road and mutilated. Dhaka Municipality's chhonnodum described their experiences of 29th March....."কিছু নারীর মৃতদেহের স্তন ছিল না, যৌনাঙ্গ বিকৃত করা হয়েছিল, তাদের পিঠ থেকে মাংস ছিঁড়ে ফেলা হয়েছিল। মহিলাদের মৃতদেহ থেকে এটা স্পষ্ট যে তাদের স্তন ছিঁড়ে ফেলা হয়েছিল, তাদের যৌনাঙ্গে রড বা বেয়নেট ঢুকিয়ে দেওয়া হয়েছিল।"(Mamun, 1971, p.26)

In 1972, A renowned Indian Novelist, Mulk Raj Anand said that, "Rapes were so systematic and pervasive that they had to be conscious Army policy planned by the West Pakistanis in a deliberate effort to create a new race or to dilute Bengali Nationalism." (Mamun, 1971, p.14)

The members of the Razakars and the Peace Committee picked up women from schools, colleges, hospitals, roadside and their homes. A number of women from the rape victims committed suicide to escape torture, some were killed. The approximate number couldn't be found as some families of the rape victims didn't confess about the rape due to social issues. He also said, "the Pakistani invaders took young girls to their camp and sexually exploited at gunpoint and threw them out or killed them after discovering certain symptoms of a disease or pregnancy" (Mamun, 1971, p. 19). Sussane Brownmiller wrote: "Rape in Bangladesh had hardly been restricted to beauty...girls of eight and grandmothers of seventy-five had been sexually assaulted....." (Mamun, 1971, p.17). As Wartime Rape was not primarily motivated by sexual desire as soldiers don't target physically attractive younger women as it is being tightly controlled genetically, the character, intensity and savagery.

A rape is an aggressive or humiliating act employed by a soldier to demonstrate his power. He rapes because the woman belongs to his enemy and is herself the enemy. And the acquisition of the female body means a piece of territory conquered. Women from Sylhet, Balagunge's Burunga, Adityapur, Sherpur, Simanta and Howrah, Rajnagar, Shayestagunge and Sadhuhati were being gangraped. Pakistani Army wanted to be unaware of these incident in order to be exempted from liability. New York Times Sydney H, Sheinburge: "Pakistani soldiers picked up Bengali girls from almost every sector and detained them in their Barrack as sex slaves." (Mamun, 1971, p.18)

These girls were kept naked most of the time. After their surrender on 16th December, shattered parts of these women's bodies were discovered. Pakistani armies killed girls by inserting bayonets in their vagina. Dr Hassan divided persecution of women into four parts - Spot Rape, Mass or Gang-rape, Rape in Custody and Sexual Slavery. (Mamun, 1971, p.18)

A woman was being gang raped by multiple men, one at a time in front of their father, brother, husband and son. Often the father was forced to rape their daughters and sons their mothers in front of everyone. They were starved to death unless and until they agreed to their sexual slavery. Thus the different manifestations of violence etched on a women's body were a proof of their occupation. In the refuge camp the survivors expressed their desire to die. More than that they had to face social ostracisations from their villages. Some women were taken back by their families but later disposed of in order to escape public humiliations. To bear witness to the court in 1992, Eleazan, Masuda and Duljan, three rape victims were brought to Dhaka. On their return to their villages, people stigmatised and abraded them after knowing about their Identity. It's evident from Masuda's statement, "People from our society, neighbours hate us and have become intolerant. We are denied water from tube wells. Our's is a miserable condition as we are reduced

to contaminated beings and dishonoured. We have turned homeless and penniless". (Mamun, 1971, p.31)

The participation of women in the war was not as visible as men. War is mostly studied from a perspective reflecting overt male chauvinism and ego-centrism. The history is mostly men's domain where women were not acknowledged as a part of history. In the narratives of the Liberation War of Bangladesh in 1971, women were visible only when depicted as victims.

When the *Muktijuddha* started, women of all religions, race, class and ethnicity participated in the freedom struggle. Not only Bengali women, indigenous women had rigorously participated in the liberation war. They expressed a strong desire to participate and tried their level best to help in any way in the Freedom Movement of Bangladesh.

The news of persecution of Bengali women spread like bonfire in the Western World through newspapers and media. Their abduction was published in a few newspapers and the news of rape survivors came to the forefront. Through several reports, it was evident that the women were infuriated with their husband's as for their unwillingness to accept them. The rape survivors found it difficult to conform to the notions of respectability which the State sought to destroy through exaggerated cultural representations of the Birangona. Rape or physical violation change the victim's relationship to her immediate society because of the shame attached to it, was not placed within the realm of kinship ties because of the threat of contaminating the heteronormative family system. She can't take into account the middle class domestic paradigm which legitimises her presence in the dominant structures of social and cultural life.(Ghatak, 2022)

Pakistanis adopted the policy of impregnation of Bengali women so that they will bear sons carrying West Pakistani blood in their veins and serve as a proof of their occupation. Women like Saleha, Nahar, Anoara, Rokeya, Nurjahan, Giribala, Manju Rani, Monoara and millions of unnamed women were gangraped and underwent genital mutilation. Most of them were rescued by the *Muktibahinis*. Some had to undergo treatment in the Rehabilitation camp as they were in an unstable state. Most of them were suffering from Syphilis, malnutrition and went to a delirious state and found abortion the best option to be saved from slur. But, many women had lost their self esteem after their abuse and got scorned by family, husband, in-laws; especially, unmarried women were denigrated as escorts. Most of them were hesitant to talk about their experiences in the Military Barrack but were pacified by the women volunteers and reporters. Some of them could name their rapists, some didn't want to return home to escape indignation. They wanted justice to be served and pleaded for the punishment of their rapists. *Bongobondhu* in one of his speeches encouraged men to marry Birangonas and make them their life partners. Some socially dignified men expressed their interest in marrying rape victims and were happily wedded to them. Some started a new life and others were disowned. Some couldn't get over the trauma of rape and loss of their family. But all these women fearlessly stood and fought for their country.

The life of a Birangona consists of pain and had no sense of belonging and they survived by begging. Their shelter was snatched by the State. War heroes or *Muktijoddhas* were appreciated for their sacrifice for their nation whereas the same thing done by a woman is being scorned. *Muktijoddha* Halima Khatun, Najema Begum, Fatima Khatun fought against the West Pakistanis and was caught and captured by Pakistani army. They were gang raped every night by the soldiers and were denied two meals a day. After conceiving babies some women deserted them

and these babies were handed over to International Social Services. Some were adopted by many British families.

The scars on a woman's body acts as a narrative of the events of Partition. Literature is the only space where we get to see these alternate narratives. They have been recording for the generation of women and are giving voices to women who have been silenced through centuries by patriarchy. In this paper, the marginalisation of the female body not only as a site of violence, but also as a locus of resistance and an agency for the articulation of an independent voice is being justified. As an academic, my standpoint is that society treats the and Birangonas differently, they penalise the heroines but the heroes are appreciated. Survival becomes a challenge for them and life completely changes after the war. The estrangement of the survivors in their own homeland due to custodial rape is being reflected upon in my paper. Women's active participation in the freedom struggle and their occupation by their enemies is being brought to limelight. It also foregrounds double stigmatization by the society on being a woman and a rape victim. In my paper, I have argued that women's imagined position as reproducers of a nation and markers of its cultural boundaries leads to the violation of their bodily autonomy being interpreted as a transgression of the collective's boundaries. And in doing so forms an essential motivation behind the wide-scale perpetration of sexual violence during ethno-nationalist wars.

Throughout the paper, we have observed how the imagination of women in nationalist discourses constitutes them as political signs, as symbols of national honour and boundaries, which shapes the violence against them both during and in the aftermath of war. Benefactors to the literature do not perceive themselves as arguing a merely academic question. They do their Research and report their discovery in the primitive opinion that we must understand our problems before we aspire to solve them. For the first time the discipline of literature is able to showcase the bold

stand taken by women where she challenges the masculinist oppression of the State power to parade their naked body after raping and battering them by Khan soldiers and Razakars. The Digital Age provided them with a self, enabled them to gain voice and agency.

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