

Women, War, and the Birth of Bangladesh

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Women in the Liberation War of Bangladesh (Collected)

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Abstract

My thesis explores the impact of women revolutionaries during the 1971 Liberation War of Bangladesh: it investigates the reasons that thrust Bengali women into political activism: Why did they take up arms, or provide protection to the Bengali revolutionaries in their struggle against the Pakistani military junta? The role of women freedom fighters in the history of Bangladesh's liberation is an understudied theme compared to the role of their male compatriots. This dissertation seeks to restore agency to women in the nation's fight for freedom. Methodologically, my research interrogates two major components of primary sources: archival documents on the 1971 liberation war, and interviews of contemporaneous observers and/or their descendants. I complement this through a study of 1971 war-related printed Bengali novels, local histories, periodicals, and diaries. I tapped into published Bangladesh government data as secondary sources, as well as new documentaries, videos, and photographs. Due to this project's aim of understanding the women freedom fighters' own perspectives and truths, I applied principles of emergent design in data collection and analysis. My data analysis followed a combination of inductive content analysis and narrative analysis. The inductive approach condenses raw textual data into brief summaries, to establish clear links between the research objectives and the summary findings derived from the raw data, and to develop a framework of the underlying structure of experiences that are evident in the raw data. The narrative analysis focuses on my interpretation of stories or experiences shared by interviewees within the social context of the research project.

Résumé

Ma thèse explore l'impact des femmes révolutionnaires pendant la guerre de libération du Bangladesh en 1971 : elle examine les raisons qui ont poussé les femmes Bengalis à poursuivre l'activisme politique : pourquoi ont-elles pris les armes, ou ont fourni une protection aux révolutionnaires Bengalis dans leur lutte contre la junte militaire pakistanaise ? Le rôle des femmes révolutionnaires de la liberté dans l'histoire de la libération du Bangladesh est un thème peu étudié par rapport au rôle de leurs compatriotes masculins. Cette thèse vise à redonner aux femmes le pouvoir d'agir dans la lutte nationale pour la liberté. Méthodologiquement, ma recherche interroge deux composantes majeures des sources primaires: des documents d'archives sur la guerre de libération de 1971, et des entretiens d'observateurs contemporains et/ou de leurs descendants. Je complète cela par une étude de romans Bengalis imprimés liés à la guerre de 1971, de périodiques d'histoires locales et de journaux intimes. J'ai aussi recherché dans les données publiées par le gouvernement du Bangladesh en tant que sources secondaires, ainsi que dans de nouveaux documentaires, vidéos et photographies. L'objectif de ce projet c'est comprendre les propres perspectives et vérités des femmes combattantes pour la liberté, afin de cela j'ai appliqué les principes de la conception émergente dans la collecte et l'analyse des données. Mon analyse de données a suivi une combinaison d'analyse de contenu inductive et d'analyse narrative. L'approche inductive condense les données textuelles brutes en brefs résumés, pour établir des liens clairs entre les objectifs de la recherche et les résultats sommaires dérivés des données brutes, pendant aussi développant un cadre de la structure sous-jacente des expériences qui sont évidentes dans les données brutes. L'analyse narrative se concentre sur mon interprétation des histoires ou des expériences partagées par les personnes interrogées dans le contexte social du projet de recherche.

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I also thank Prof. Dr. Sonia Amin who shared her nuanced perspective, on the role of women in the war and vital contacts whom I could interview. I thank dearest, honorable Prof. Dr. Aksadul Alam for his kind support directing me to relevant literature, and help with navigating many contacts; Zakia Khan; and A.T.M. Jayed who provided me a large number of primary sources and shared his experiences of interviewing war heroines and his thoughts which, I believe, gave me some important perspectives. I am grateful to National Archives of Bangladesh and Bangladesh War Museum for allowing me to browse all the necessary documents and books. I would also like to thank my department history and classical studies of McGill University for giving the opportunity to study my masters and writing my dissertation.

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Introduction:

War can never be appreciated- it is neither good nor great, and only leads to total destruction. Wars are fought for different motives: such as, for clan, for nationhood, for ethnicity, for country and for religion. Half a century has passed since Bangladesh was born through a bloody war and conflict with Pakistan. It lasted for only nine months, from 25 March to 16 December 1971. Though the period was short compared to other wars such as the Vietnam War or the Second World War, the background was layered with complex processes of state formation, questions of language, representation, persecution, and gross economic disparity. Evocative yet poignant, the words of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, Bangabandhu and father of the nation, in his historic address on March 7, 1971 spoke of suppression, domination, and marginalization of East Pakistan by civil-military authorities based in West Pakistan. The following words packed enormous power and motivated the populace of East Pakistan to fight for their liberty at all costs.

*Rokto jokhon diyechi rokto aro debo/Edesher manush ke mukto kore charbo Inshallah. (We will shed more blood if needed, as we have already shed blood/- We will liberate the people of this country God willing.)*¹

The atrocious and horrendous nature of wars terribly impacts women – the Bengali women living erstwhile East Pakistan (East Bengal Prior to 1945) experienced overwhelming trauma, including

¹ Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, in his speech on 7th March in Racecourse Maidan (ground), called for turning every household into redoubtable forts. This gives us a glimpse of the Bengalis' intent to prepare in advance for the war of Bangladesh in 1971. To see detail announcement please visit the following link: Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib's 7th March Speech: Epic of Politics, accessed on 10th August, 2022.
https://ictd.gov.bd/sites/default/files/files/ictd.portal.gov.bd/publications/3e39d17f_a9ba_40f0_a7ff_9f005a2c29a2/Bangabandhu%20Sheikh%20Mujibs%207th%20March%20Speech.pdf.

sexual violence during 1971 liberation war of Bangladesh. However, Bengali² (who lived in East Pakistan) women also substantially contributed to the liberation war to ensure security of their rights and a free country – the central theme that this thesis engages with. The Awami League (AL), strongly based in East Pakistan, won a landslide victory in the 1970 Pakistan general elections, and rightfully wanted to form the government – a constitutional right. However, the military regime of Pakistan (based in West Pakistan) not only denied the constitutional process, but also unleashed an unexpected brutal military assault on the civilians of East Pakistan. Thus, we can argue that this war was committed by the military authorities of West Pakistan and Bengalis fought for self-defence, to survive and for their independence. Moreover, the Pakistani military attack caught the general populace and the politically aware civilians alike unawares. Nonetheless, shortly soon after, people joined the war efforts with the priceless help of the Indian Government, to protect themselves. Though their preparation was limited, their bravery and patriotism filled up the deficiencies. It was a fight of civilians against a trained army and armed West Pakistan supported militias. While the warriors could not fight successfully or following regulations all the time, their ulterior objective was to kill or defeat the Pakistan army and to save their lives and their families. However, people had dilemma and confusions as well as the spirit to fight for different reasons, a feature which I will discuss more in this thesis.

Women played a vital role in the war in multifarious ways. Earlier too Bengali women had been involved in political activism – in varying degrees – in different movements: nationalist, democratic, and anti-British resistance. They became engaged with the liberation war eventually, even though it was not an easy task for women of all backgrounds. In this case women were not a

² Language of East Bengal is Bengali.

single entity. They belonged to different socio-economic classes and religions. Regardless of their status, women crucially contributed to the war efforts.

People of East Bengal fought for liberty during the British colonial rule in South Asia. Finally, the ‘*Two Nation Theory*’ partitioned British India in 1947 into two independent nation states of India and Pakistan, the latter with a Muslim majority population. However, religious similarity was hardly a strong force to establish equality between East and West Pakistan. Since its birth, Pakistan was a problematic structure with two distant parts to the East and to the West of India. Badruddin Umar narrates the consequences of the problematic structure that was born soon after the announcement of the Mountbatten dispensation on June 3, 1947. The attention of a section of ‘left’ Muslim league workers including some senior ones was turned to the new realities of the situation.³ Moreover, West Pakistan considered East Pakistan as their colony and the exploitative nature of the regime imprinted on Bengali people that they are not the same, despite the majority populace professing the same religion. The question of state language: ‘*Pakistan er rashtro bhasha Bangla na Urdu*’ (What is the state language of Pakistan, Bengali or Urdu?); the Language Movement of 1952; and the 1969 mass uprising created conditions that pushed the Bengalis of East Pakistan towards a war of liberation.⁴ Political freedom, economic freedom and social freedom all are interrelated. Thus, political freedom has no value if it cannot bring about economic freedom to the people. Because without economic freedom it is impossible to have social and cultural developments.⁵ The following table demonstrates how West Pakistani dominated the

³ Badruddin Umar. ‘*Purba Banglar Bhasha Andolon o Tatkalin Rajnity (Language movement in East Bengal)*’ vol.1, (Dhaka: Jatiya Grantha Publication, 1995), P. 64.

⁴ Umar, ‘*Purba Banglar Bhasha Andolon o Tatkalin Rajnity*, Pp. 17-18.

⁵ Umar, *Purba Banglar Bhasha Andolon o Tatkalin Rajneety*’ P.18.

divided country and the percentage spent on East decreased in share from the 1950s in the common budget.⁶

Year	Spending on West Pakistan (in corers of Pakistani rupees)	Spending on East Pakistan (in corers of Pakistani rupees)	Amount spent on East as percentage of West
1950-55	1,129	524	46.4
1955-60	1,655	524	31.7
1960-65	3,355	1,404	41.8
1965-70	5,195	2,141	41.2
Total	11,334	4,593	40.5

Source: Reports of the Advisory Panels for the four five Year Plan 1970-75. Vol.1, Published by the planning commission of Pakistan(quick reference crore: 10 million)

Bengali women had an intense historical background of involvement in political activism since the days of British colonial rule in South As. Women in British India contributed to armed revolution; women participated in different revolts such as the Tebhaga Movement in 1946-47;⁷ and, following the decolonization of British India in 1947 in the Language Movement in 1952, 1969's mass revolt and 1970's movement to the Liberation war of 1971. They had been very actively involved in protests and/or revolts – in the 1971 war they played a multifarious role.

⁶ Juwel Sadi. "Bangladesh Liberation War." Accessed on 12 August, 2022. To see more details, visit https://www.academia.edu/9561777/Bangladesh_Liberation_War

⁷ This revolted happened due to tax. Accessed on 12 August, 2022. To see details, please visit: https://en.banglapedia.org/index.php/Tebhaga_Movement

The official narratives, stories of the origin of the freedom movement, its main leaders, and exploits of freedom fighters are retold and passed on, by heart, generations after generations. However, unfortunately, one of the greatest shortcomings in the perception of Bangladesh's fight for independence is the nation's continual failure to recognise the role of women in the liberation war. In fact, the role of women is largely ignored, denied, and misconstrued in the mainstream history of Bangladesh.

This can be attributed to our stereotypical tendency to think of war only in terms of physical combat and exchange of gunfire – primarily a masculine act. However, current statistics show that more than 75 per cent of war casualties are non-combatants, including a large number of women and children. Because modern weaponry is designed to hurt the largest possible number and is indiscriminating in causing hurt and death.⁸ The 1971 Liberation War affected the entire population of a country, translating into a struggle through which a united nation asserted its aspiration for freedom. Such wars were neither fought only in the battlefields, nor were they fought only with guns. War heroes include women who supported the valiant freedom fighters with food, shelter, and funds, nursed the wounded, and hid weapons, risking their own lives. They also included those who willingly sacrificed their sons for war, lost their loved ones, and even worse, were subjected to harrowing sexual abuse and still survived to tell their stories. When Bangladesh attained freedom, the male freedom fighters were welcomed with glory, but the women, who had suffered physical violence and mental torture, were shamefully overlooked.

Writing subaltern history is a challenging exercise. The postcolonial theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak points out that any representation of the subaltern, even one that attempts to rewrite from

⁸ Anuradha M Chenoy, *"Militarism & Women in south Asia"* (New Delhi: Kali For Women Publishing 2002), p. 27

the perspective of the subaltern as the subject of her own history, will take us into the deepest philosophical questions of cognition and representation.⁹

Objectives

My research objectives are as follows, and they will shape the organization of this thesis:

- (i) Who am I – Bengali or Muslim?
- (ii) Exploring the different roles of women in the war;
- (iii) Women's role in auxiliary activities;
- (iv) Women's role as combatants;
- (v) Women's role in the political sphere of Bangladesh; and
- (vi) Women's role and their sacrifices in a global perspective.

At the outset I interrogate questions of religious identity and nationalism. Then, I explore how women became involved with the Bengali Nationalism and politics by discussing the partition of British India and its aftermath until 1971. And finally, I highlight the role of women and their sacrifices in the war, from a global perspective, including the reasons behind the silence on women's role in history.

⁹ Gayatri Spivak. "The Ethical Affirmation of Human Rights" in *Can The Subltern Speak?: Reflections on the History of an Idea*, edited by Rosalind C. Morris. (New York : Clumbia University Press 2010,) P. 101

Method and Materials

In terms of writing a history of women, biographies of women and the books written by women mostly upheld their suppressed glorious history compared to the books written by men. Organic feelings, genuine enthusiasm, and experience are revealed in their writings. So, I have used literary sources written only by women. In this respect, Joan Kelly underlines two theoretical structures on women's history. She says, there are two goals while writing women's history. First, to restore women to history, and second, to restore our history to the women. She also indicates three problematical concerns of historical thought such as (i) periodization, (ii) the categories of social analysis, and (iii) theories of social changes. She says, due to being deprived from the facilities in any particular time period in terms of economy, politics, and cultural entities, the very same historical incident impacts women differently.¹⁰

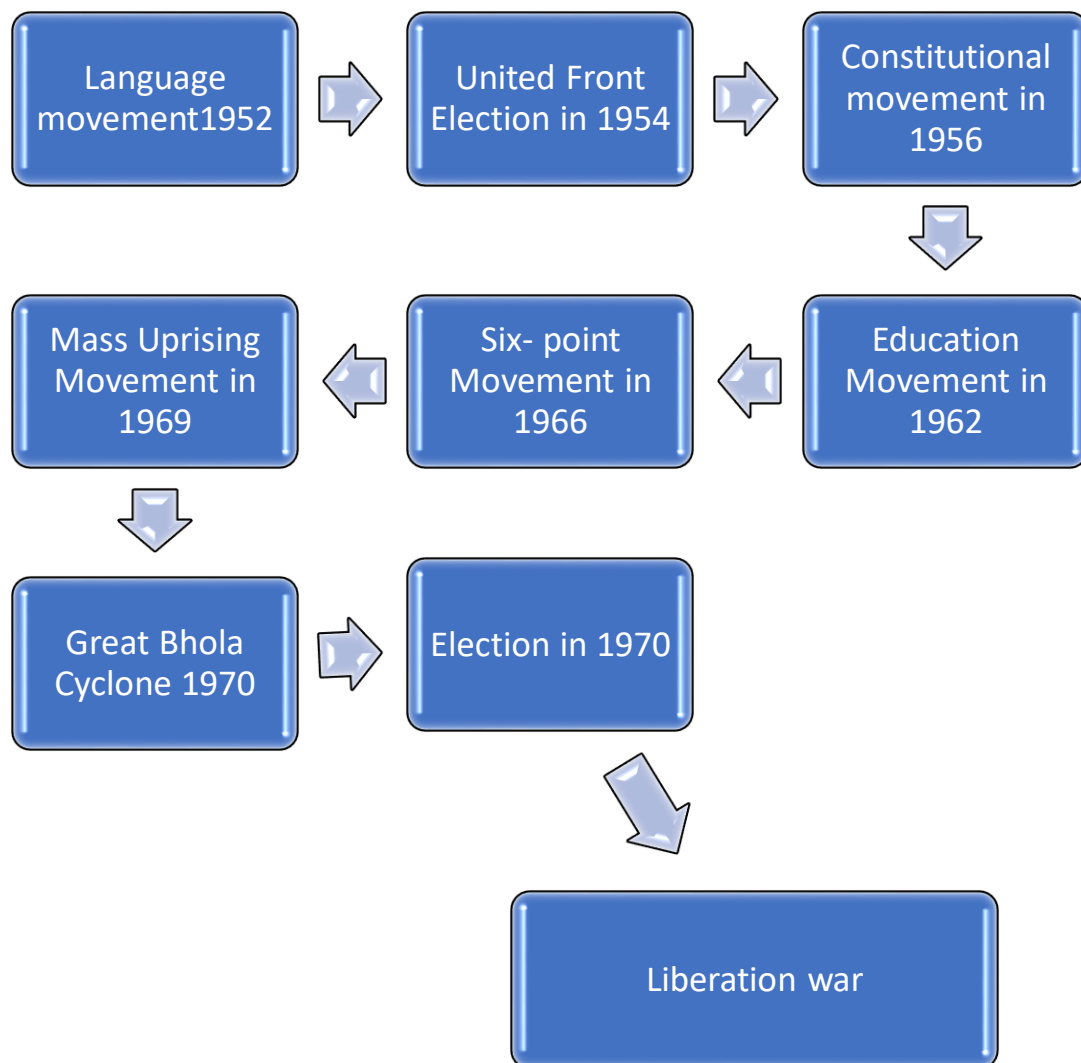
This thesis is based on primary and secondary data. I used primary sources like interviews with women freedom fighters, literary works, oral history, newspaper reports, diaries, archival documents, documentaries, and photographs. Data collection comprised Historical data collection method and Qualitative data collection method (Interview, Case study). As secondary sources, I read books – fiction and nonfiction – relating to the liberation war, written by female authors of Bangladesh. The narrative analysis focused on my interpretation of stories or experiences shared by the interviewees.

¹⁰ Joan Kelly. "The Social Relation of the Sexes: Methodological Implications of Women's History" in *Women, History, and Theory: The Essays of Joan Kelley*, (Chicago and London. The University of Chicago Press, 1986) Pp. 1-2

Chapter-1

Who am I – Muslim and/or Bengali?

Let us preface our discussion of the role of women in the liberation war of Bangladesh with an analysis of the background of Bangladeshi nationalism and incorporation of women into it since the partition of British India in 1947. The developments during the period from 1947 to 1971 denote that liberation war was not a sudden incident. Rather it resulted from many unwanted events. The following process chart shows the gradual developments leading to the war.



East Pakistan encountered some major political upheavals after the partition of British India in 1947: the Language movement in 1952, the United Front Election in 1954, the Constitutional movement in 1956, the Education Movement in 1962, the Six- Point Movement in 1966, the Mass Uprising in 1969, the Great Bhola cyclone in 1970 which caused massive destruction, and lastly, the Awami League not forming the government despite its victory in the 1970 general election.

As the British colonial rule ended, communal tensions ran high in the Indian subcontinent. Jinnah's proposal for Pakistan on the basis of religious nationalism was popularised by variety of Muslim campaigns and organisations throughout the early 20th century. Pakistan was born on the basis of the 'Two Nation theory'.¹¹ But, the Muslim identity was downplayed sooner after 1947. Pakistan contained multiple ethnic and linguistic communities of Punjabi, Bengali, Sindhi, Baluchi, Pathan, and the Urdu-speaking groups from Bihar and Uttar Pradesh (Emigres from India – Muhajirs). Such diverse communities, however, split Pakistan physically, emotionally, politically, and culturally. The biggest weakness of a nascent Pakistan was territorial separation – East and West Pakistan. The Punjabis who dominated in the West vied for power with the Bengalis in the East, who constituted the majority of the population of united Pakistan. Supported by the Urdu-speaking immigrants from Bihar and Uttar Pradesh who spread and established themselves in West and East Pakistan, the Punjabi factor slowly established its prominence in Pakistan's identity and politics.¹² On the other hand, the people of East Pakistan also discovered themselves as subjects of West Pakistan rather than as citizens of Pakistan. People of East Pakistan experienced discrimination in every fundamental aspect, such as political, economic, bureaucratic, alimentary, and cultural. Initially, the people of East Pakistan faced linguistic discrimination. The Pakistani state's attitude of favoritism towards the people of West Pakistan, especially towards the Punjabi and Urdu speaking community, fomented public tension in both parts of Pakistan. Urdu was proposed as the national language, while 60% of Pakistani population who lived in East Bengal spoke Bengali.

¹¹ In 1947, as British colonial rule ended, the Indian subcontinent was partitioned into India and Pakistan. India was founded on secular republic but soon became mired in majoritarian politics expressed in communal and religious violence that has bloodied the landscape of postcolonial history. Pakistan, on the other hand, was founded on the rhetoric of religious nationalism popularised by variety of Muslim campaigns and organisations throughout the early 20th century that emboldened the Muslim League under the leadership of Mohammad Ali Jinnah to make an assertive demand for Pakistan.... noted by Saikia, Yasmin. *Women war and the Making of Bangladesh Remembering 1971* (New Delhi: 'Women Unlimited as associate of Kali for Women', 2011) pp. 45-46

¹² Saikia. *Women war and the Making of Bangladesh Remembering 1971*

Under these circumstances, a section of left-wing Muslim League Workers, including some senior ones, turned its attention to the new realities. Language was a crucial factor in education and to secure jobs. In July 1947 a small group of workers assembled in Dhaka and formed an organisation called *Gano Azadi League* (People Freedom League) and published a manifesto entitled *Ashu Dabi Karmashuchi Adarsha* (Immediate demands programmes and ideology). They noted:

The independence of a country and freedom of the people are two distinct matters. A country can gain independence from a foreign rule; but that does not mean that the people of that country have gained freedom. Political freedom has no value if it cannot bring economic freedom to the people. Because without economic freedom, it's not possible to have social and cultural developments.¹³

The youth, especially the students of Dhaka University, begun serious activism in this regard. A cultural organisation called *Tamaddun Majlish* published a pamphlet in Bengali called '*Pakistan er Rastro bhasha Bangla na Urdu* (The state language of Pakistan Bengali or Urdu)? And 1952's Language movement was the final consequence of cultural exploitation. 1952's Language movement infused the cognition of nationalism in the people of East Pakistan. Unequal and exclusionary national education policy in 1962 under the shadow of educational reforms too affected the students a lot.¹⁴ In 1966 the historical Six Points Protest was the first outburst of subterranean anger.¹⁵ People of East Pakistan expected to properly enjoy their rights after the mass movement in 1969. But harsher realities confronted them soon after the 1970 election. East Pakistan Awami League won the election but could not form the government. Then, on 7th March

¹³ Umar, Badruddin. *Purba Bangla Bhasha Andolon O Tatkalin Rajnity*, pp. 17-18

¹⁴ Nahid Riyasad. "EDUCATION MOVEMENT 1962: unresolved question of inequality in education," *New Age*, September 23, 2018, <https://www.newagebd.net/article/51214/education-movement-1962-unresolved-question-of-inequality-in-education>.

¹⁵ Six-point Programme a charter of demands enunciated by the Awami League for removing disparity between the two wings of Pakistan and to put an end to the internal colonial rule of West Pakistan in East Bengal. To see details, please visit: https://en.banglapedia.org/index.php/Six-point_Programme

1971 Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the father of the nation, in his speech at the Dhaka Racecourse Field, exhorted people to prepare for a war. So, the populace of East Pakistan assumed that the war might be the final option for them. However, around midnight on 25th March 1971, the Pakistani Army launched 'Operation Search Light,' a brutal assault without prior warning that assassinated unarmed asleep civilians. The deployment of tanks and method of attack signified that it was a pre-planned, well-prepared action. On 26th March, Major Ziaur Rahman, former president of Bangladesh (1977-1981), declared the independence of Bangladesh on behalf of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, from the Kalurghat radio station. Bangladesh was born after nine months of war and conflicts between the military and the civilians and nationalist freedom fighters. India played significant role during the war, with her crucial support in every aspect such as providing asylum, food, arms, training, and finally, with military intervention.

This historic development, in a nutshell, sought liberty of the people of East Pakistan, the Bengalis. However, unfortunately until recently, the entire process has been treated as only a masculine achievement, while women were in a critical part of the war. Though women's lives were confined in domestic chores and maintaining family life with no individual lifestyle of their own, particularly in the rural regions, women smashed this barrier when their children, husbands, and families were endangered. They asserted themselves not only against the military rule, but also against patriarchy. In so doing, they discovered themselves, and expressed their senses of identity and liberty. On the one hand they were the Bengalis, on the other hand they were women. They expressed and lived this dual identity during the war.

Chapter 2:

Different Roles of Women In the war

The following verses of Kazi Nazrul Islam trigger my thoughts whenever I contemplate women's role in the world:

বিশ্বের যা কিছু মহান সৃষ্টি চির কল্যাণকর [Of all noble creations in this world]

অর্ধেক তার করিয়াছে নারী, অর্ধেক তার নর।... [women created one half, and men the other.]

কোন রণে কত খুন দিল নর, লেখা আছে ইতিহাসে [History records how much blood men shed in wars]

কত নারী দিল সিঁথির সিঁদুর, লেখা নাই তার পাশে। [But, it is silent on how many women were widowed.]

কত মাতা দিল হৃদয় উপড়ি, কত বোন দিল সেবা [How many mothers had their hearts wrenched, or how many sisters nursed (the wounded)]

বীর স্মৃতি স্তম্ভের গায়ে লিখিয়া রেখেছে কেবা? [Are absent from the memorials of heroes]

কোন কালে একা হয়নি ক জয়ী পুরুষের তরবারী [Men's sword never won due to men's valour alone]

প্রেরণা দিয়েছে, শক্তি দিয়েছে বিজয় লক্ষী নারী। [Women inspired, women gave strength – let it be known.]

Half a century has elapsed since Bangladesh was born. But, do we know how many mothers, wives, and sisters sacrificed themselves in many different ways? Or how many women participated in the war in how many ways? Recently 657 women freedom fighters were awarded with crest by the government.¹⁶

Neither do I offer a bird's eye view nor that of a church mouse who cannot see anything beyond what is in front of his or her nose. I approach my research question from an open, but compassionate viewpoint: Why women's contribution is suppressed and forgotten even though they played a substantial role in the birth of Bangladesh?

Women's role across different periods shows how easily women became involved with the political movement and finally in the war. Women participated in different political movements ever since Pakistan was born. A large change took place in all spheres – political, cultural, and economic – after the partition of British India in 1947. Religious nationalism was a key factor behind the partition. However, erstwhile East Pakistan soon confronted the reality of cultural differences between the two parts of Pakistan. The Bengali Muslim scholar Dr. Muhammad Shahidullah addressed the concern at the East Pakistan literary conference in December 1948 in Dhaka, “while it is true that we are Hindus or Muslims, the more important truth is that we are all Bengalis.”¹⁷ In fact, it was the language based movement that first sparked nationalism among the Bengalis. Therefore, the language movement was not simply a movement to support the cause of

¹⁶ Bangladesh Sangbad Sangstha, “Govt honours 654 women freedom fighters,” New Age, February 16, 2022, <https://www.newagebd.net/article/162887/govt-honours-654-women-freedom-fighters>

¹⁷ S. A. F Ahmed 1997 “*Twenty-Sixth March and Aftermath: Some Reflections.*” *The Independent: Special Supplement on Silver Jubilee of Independence*, March 16 in Nayanika Mookherjee, *The Spectral Wound: Sexual Violence, Public Memories, and the Bangladesh War of 1971*. (Duke University Press, 2015). P. 5

the Bengali language against imposition of Urdu, but its importance was very intense and much wider.

For a holistic analysis of the contribution of women, I classify their activities into two chronological eras.

(i) Women's role from 1947 to 1968:

Language is an integral element of humans – it connects emotion, feeling, expression, reaction, and action. Pakistan government started using Urdu and English for government services such as, railway ticket, money order. There civil service exam featured nine languages excluding Bengali when only 3.27% of total people used to speak in Urdu¹⁸. On the contrary, 60% people used to speak in Bengali.

During the Bengali language movement in 1952, women had a meaningful participation. Women took to the streets, defied the curfew, and broke through a barricade at a protest when others were passing around it. In fact, the national language struggle ushered in a renaissance among women, leading them to demonstrate on the streets, moving beyond societal restrictions. These women demanded legal justice at a legislative assembly for the victims of 21st February procession.¹⁹ In 1952, female students were at the forefront of the procession of language movement which shows

¹⁸ Asma Parveen. *Bangladesher Swadhinotajuddhe Narir Prottyokkho Onshogrohon*(Direct participation of women in Bangladesh's independence war)(Dhaka: Tofajjal Hossen, 2011) P. 42

¹⁹ On 21 March 1948 at the Race Course Maidan in Dhaka and on 24 March 1948 at the convocation ceremony of Dhaka University, Governor-General of Pakistan Mohammad Ali Jinnah announced that only Urdu and Urdu shall be the state language of Pakistan. After that, protests erupted to promote the cause of Bengali language and Bengali-speaking populace, the repression policy of the government intensified. Many students were arrested. On January 26, 1952, Prime Minister Khawaja Nazimuddin announced that Urdu will be the only state language of Pakistan. The students of Dhaka University protested and the all-party National Language Action Council was formed. A students' strike was observed in all educational institutions on 4th February, called by the Rashtrabhasha Karma Parishad (National Language Action Council). On February 12, 13, Black Flag Day was celebrated across the country and on February 21, it announced its determination to hold a mass protest day. In response, the provincial government imposed Section 144. On February 21, when the students marched in violation of Section 144, the police opened fire on the procession. Abdul Jabbar, Abul Barkat, Rafiq Uddin Ahmed, Abdus Salam, and Shafiur Rahman were shot dead. And several hundred were injured. Ibid. p. 40-43

how women were impacted by the Bengali nationalism in 1950's East Pakistan. Courageous women such as Momtaj Begum, Halima Khatun, Nadera Begum, and Novera Ahmed marched at the front of the procession. These valiant women were not only brutally charged with batons but were also arrested. Momtaj Begum was the headmistress of Narayanganj Morgan High School during the language movement in 1952. She had incredible courage and organizational capability. When the police prepared to arrest her for participating in the language movement, the angry public resisted, demanded her unconditional release, and called for Bangla as the national language "*Rashtribhasha bangla chai*." Government officials ran false propaganda. On 29th February, she was arrested by the police on a false charge of embezzling 25 thousand Rupees. She was taken to Narayanganj. The Daily Azad, the representative of Muslim League government, published a report heading 'Weird Life of Momtaj Begum' by the government controlled news agency Associate Press of Pakistan (APP). This report mainly fabricated Momtaj Begum's personal life and religious issues to justify the arrest and refusal of bail. On the other hand, Momtaj Begum was divorced by her husband due to her refusal to sign her bail bond. Thus, Momtaj Begum sacrificed her personal security for language.²⁰ Dr. Halima Khatun, Dr. Shafia Khatun, Rowshan Ara Bacchu, Sufia Ibrahim, Fazilatunnesa, and Zulekha were some of these fearless women participants. Dr. Shafia Khatun was the Vice President of Women Students Union during her student days in 1951-52. She organized the students of various women's colleges and girls' schools in Dhaka city and helped in the movement. She was a member of the 'All-Party National Language Struggle Council' which was constituted of 43 members under the chairmanship of Mawlana Abdul Hamid Khan

²⁰ Supa Sadia. "52 Women in Language Movement in 1952" (Dhaka: Jatiya Sahitya Prakash) Pp. 44-46 "Momtaj Begum's real name was Kalyani Rani Minu. During her stay in Kolkata she got Married to Munaf and converted to Islam"

Bhasani²¹ at Bar Library Hall. He held a meeting with the students of Dhaka University's (DU) Chameli House and urged them to express their solidarity with the demand for Bengali as state language. All the activities of the All Party Struggle Council, secret and public instructions were communicated to the students of DU through Shafia Khatun. On February 4, 1952, a strike was organized under the auspices of the All-Party National Language Struggle Council, when Shafia Khatun led the women's march. On February 21, she called upon supporters to break Section 144. She decided to divide the students into groups of 10 and break Section 144 in different ways. The fourth team in the group of 10 who violated Section 144 was the girls' first team led by Shafia Khatun. Sufia Ibrahim, Rawsan Ara Bacchu, and Shamsunnahar accompanied her. Their group was not arrested but the police broke up the procession by using batons and firing tear gas. Shafia Khatun was a vocal protester and an active leader of the language movement in 1952.²²

In 1955, twenty-two female protesters were arrested along with two hundred men for breaking the law and order in educational institutions. 1961 saw greater involvement of women participating in protest marches and rallies, asserting the demand for Bangla as the state language of East Pakistan. By 1967, the movement - that saw women such as Rowsan Ara Firoz, Maleka Begum, Syeda Sajeda Chowdhury, Mahfuza Rahman, Rafia Akhter Dolly, Moriom Begum, Matia Chowdhury, Ayesha Khanam, Laila Hasna Banu, and others at the forefront - had evolved significantly to a demand for greater autonomy of East Pakistan.²³ The student agitation of 1968 turned into a mass upsurge when Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhasani asked his followers to besiege the Governors House, and formulated and declared his other programmes. Our analysis thus far shows how

²¹ Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhasani, (1880-1976) politician. Popularly known as Maulana Bhasani. President of National Awami Party (NAP). To see details about Moulana Bhasani, please visit the link as follows (https://en.banglapedia.org/index.php/Bhasani,_Maulana_Abdul_Hamid_Khan)

²² Supa Sadia. "52 Women in Language Movement in 1952" Pp.84-87

²³ Nasim Firdous. "Women of Bangladesh: Where are they," *The Daily Star*, February 23, 2010. To see the details, please visit the following link. (<https://www.thedailystar.net/suppliments/2010/02/ds19/segment1/women.htm>)

women became conversant with the emerging politico-cultural cognizance of linguistic and national identity from 1947 to 1968 in East Pakistan, where an even greater political uprising beckoned them next.

ii) Women's role from 1969 to 1971: Mass Upsurge in 1969 began with the students' protest of 1968 against the tyrannical rule of Field Marshal Muhammad Ayub Khan, President of Pakistan (27 October 1958 – 25 March 1969). The movement soon engulfed the whole of the East Pakistan. Peasants, artisans, and workers joined the movement largely. Due to continuous exaction of undue demands, the labouring class of the industrial belts and low and medium income groups soon turned the movement into a struggle for economic emancipation. The racial repression and the deprivation of the Bengalis within the framework of Pakistan, and the felt and lived experiences of a separate identity since the days of the language movement prepared the ground for a more serious struggle for autonomy that directly influenced the mass uprising of 1969. Men and women alike demanded freedom, with slogans such as - "*Bir Bengali ostro dhoru Bangladesh Shwadhin koro, Joy Bangla, Tomar Desh Amar Desh Bangladesh Bangladesh*" (Brave Bengali take up arms, Liberate Bangladesh! 'Hail Bengal' – your country, my country, Bangladesh! Bangladesh!). Indeed, this uprising was the biggest incident of mass civilian discontent ever since the creation of Pakistan.

On 4 January 1969 leaders of the East Pakistan Students' Union (Menon Group), East Pakistan Students League, East Pakistan Students' Union (Matia Group), and a section of the National Students' Federation formed the Students' Action Committee (SAC) and declared their 11-point

Programme.²⁴ Matia Chowdhury was the president of the then East Pakistan Students' Union in 1965–66. Between 1967 and 1969, she organized anti Ayub movement and was detained in jail for about 2 years. She was released from jail during the mass upsurge of 1969. The *Shaheed Dibos* (Martyrs Day) of 1969 imbued the people with a new spirit of opposing tyranny. Freedom fighter Forquan Begum reminds when she, for the first time, went to her room at Eden Girls' College Hostel after admission, and found written on its walls, 'smile in Bengali, cry in Bengali, dream in Bengali, and speak in Bengali.'²⁵

Celebrating 21st February as *Shaheed Dibos* (Martyr's Day)²⁶ was a challenge for the students. The college authorities prohibited participation in processions. Female students from Rokeya Hall (girls' residential hostel of Dhaka University) led by Matia Chowdhury,²⁷ a student at Eden Girls' College, participated in the *Probhatpheri* (morning procession) barefoot with flowers in hands showing respect for the language martyrs, and broke the gate of Eden Girls' College.

The armed police of the military junta quelled the protest of students on 5th January 1969. Assaduzzaman was shot dead by the police on 20th January. Then, from Assad's ancestral house at Shibpur, his mother sent out a strong message to the student leaders, "My Assad did not die. My

²⁴ Chatra Union (Students Union) was a student wing of Communist Party of Pakistan. Menon group represented the pro-Chinese segment of Chatra Union and Matia Chowdhury group represented the pro-Soviet fraction. Chowdhury started her political career from her student life. She actively participated in the movement against the Ayub regime and the movement against the Education Commission of 1962. She was elected the Vice-President of Dhaka Eden Girls' College Students' Union in 1963 and the General Secretary of Dhaka University Central Students' Union (DUCSU) in 1964–65. Matia Chowdhury often called her Agni Konya (daughter made of fire) for her fiery speeches and her adamant attitude. Although she started her political career with the left-wing National Awami Party, she is one of the most senior leaders of the Awami League at present. To see details please visit Mass Upsurge, 1969. Bangladesh: National Encyclopedia of Bangladesh. To see details please visit https://en.banglapedia.org/index.php/Mass_Upsurge_1969

²⁵ Forquan Begum. '*Swadheenata Shangram and Muktiuddya Naree* (Women in Independence Movement and Liberation War)' (Dhaka: Sumi Printing press 1998). A welcome note for the newcomer Forquan Begum by Nilufer Panna who used to live in the same room. P. 292-293

²⁶ This day is celebrated in the remembrance of the Martyrs in 1952 language movement.

²⁷ Matia Chowdhury, leader of Student Union, former minister of Bangladesh Awami League. To see details please visit <https://www.tritiyomatra.com/profile/90>.

Assad used to say: Mother, this motherland will have a new life within the next ten years. Turn this dream of my Assad into a reality.” Assad's mother revealed herself as a freedom fighter through this message.²⁸ For a woman it is difficult to forgive anyone or rid herself of hatred when she sees her son tortured and shot dead. But, Assad's mother proved herself to be a social revolutionary as she said: Assad did not die...this motherland will have a new life...turn this dream of my Assad into a reality. She combines the paradox of love for her son and inability to pardon his murderers with her fierce patriotism.

East Pakistan Women's Association, led by the renowned poet Begum Sufia Kamal, actively joined the liberation movement, mass movement, and processions. Around 8 a.m. on 8th February 1969, under the leadership of Sufia Kamal at the Central Shaheed Minar, about half a thousand women rallied and marched to Bahadur Shah Park.²⁹ According to the newspaper sources, such as the Daily Azad's data released on 27th March, thousands of burqa-clad women also joined the procession. Women voted in large numbers in the December 1970 general election, the first and last election held under the Pakistani regime, in which the Awami League (the ruling political party of present-day Bangladesh) won 162 out of the 169 seats, with 95.85 percent share of the votes cast. Women played a significant role in achieving this landslide victory.³⁰

Numerous women attended Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's historic speech at the Racecourse ground on 7th March, 1971. Armed with bamboo sticks, they supported their leader.³¹ Not surprisingly, the liberation war featured marked participation from women. 1971 saw many

²⁸ Maleka Begum. “*Muktijuddhe Nari (Women in the Freedom war)*” (Dhaka: Prothom Prokash publication, 2012). P. 33

²⁹ Maleka Begum. “*Nari Andolon Ebong Sufia Kalmal*” 2013

³⁰ ‘Daily Azad’. Founder: Moulana Mohammad Akram Khan, DVD- 73 March-April. Published: 27th March, Saturday 1971. Bangladesh Archive.

³¹ While interviewing women freedom fighters, they mentioned the speech of 7th march that motivated them to be prepared for the war. They remember the voice of Bangabandhu.

war heroines such as Kakon Bibi, Taramon Bibi, and others as *Muktijoddha* (freedom fighter), taking up arms and fighting shoulder to shoulder with men as thousands of others provided ancillary support to the *Mukti Bahini* (freedom fighters).

No single group of people can singularly claim credit for liberating a country. It is an all-encompassing effort. Every Bangladeshi was involved in some manner in this war. However, the contribution of women is an understudied theme in the histories of the 1971 liberation war. Their exploits are missing from the history of the liberation war of Bangladesh.³²

Why is there a silence on the role of women in the history of Bangladesh's liberation war? Usually in the Muslim society, it is imperative for women to remain in the private sphere, to look after their family and their children. On the contrary, war is considered a masculine activity that takes place in public sphere. Thus, women's role has been ignored and their presence in the war was never highlighted. Drawing upon this concept of masculinity of the Muslim countries, Bangladesh too shared the same perspective.

In my opinion, this silence permeates not only the masculine society but also the Bengali Muslim nationalism of Bangladesh. Nationalist scholars claim that religious nationalism, and indeed all nationalisms, tend to be conservative, and 'conservative' often means 'patriarchal.'³³ This partly results from the tendency of nationalists to be 're-traditionalisers',³⁴ and to embrace tradition as a legitimatising basis for nation-building and cultural renewal. Bangladesh was no exception. Exact data on the number of women who participated in the liberation war is unavailable, although it is

³² Ibid

³³ Yuval-Davis, Nira 1981; Lievesley 1996; Waylen 1996. In Joane Nagel "Masculinity and Nationalism: Gender and Sexuality in the Making of Nations." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 21, no. 2 (1998): Pp. 253–255.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/014198798330007>

³⁴ Joane Nagel. *American Indian Ethnic Renewal: Red Power and the Resurgence of Identity and Culture*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996). p. 193

quite clear that women played different types of roles in their own sphere, be it private or public. However, after the war, Muslim society tried to push women back to their kitchens. Women remained almost invisible in the history of Bangladeshi nationalism and its liberation war history. Women's sexuality often turns out to be a matter of prime national interest for at least two reasons. First, women's role in nationalism is most often that of a mother, the symbol of the national hearth and home. For instance, Yuval-Davis reminds us, 'In France, it was La Patrie, a figure of a woman giving birth which personified the revolution³⁵'. In their discussion of Afrikaner nationalism in South Africa, Gaitskell and Unterhalter argue that Afrikaner women appear regularly in the rhetoric and imagery of the Afrikaner 'Volk' (people), and that 'they have figured overwhelmingly as mothers'³⁶. Second, women's sexuality is of concern to nationalists since women as wives and daughters are repositories of masculine honour. For instance, ethnographers report that the Afghani Muslim nationalists' conception of resource control, particularly labour, land, and women, is defined as a matter of honour; 'purdah is a key element in the protection of the family's pride and honour.'³⁷

In post-1971 Bangladesh, public attention regarding women and war has almost exclusively centred on sexual violence or rape. The assaulted women (raped or sexually abused) were mostly highlighted as *Birangana* or *valorous heroines* in the post-war history or in the documentaries, movies, and novels. Rape indeed is one of the vicious violations of women's rights and freedom. It became a social taboo in Bangladesh which overlooked women's other roles in the liberation

³⁵ Nira Yuval-Davis, 'Identity politics and women's ethnicity' in Val Moghadam (ed.), *Identity Politics and Women: Cultural Ressertation and Feminism in International Perspective*, (Boulder: Westview press 1993). Pp. 627

³⁶ Deborah Aitskell, and Elaine Unterhalter '*Mothers of the nation: a comparative analysis of nation, race, and motherhood in Afrikaner Nationalism and the African National Congress*', in N. Yuval-Davis and F. Anthias (eds), *Woman Nation-State*, (New York: St Martin's Press, 1989) Pp. 58–78

³⁷ Joane Nagel "Masculinity and Nationalism: Gender and Sexuality in the Making of Nations." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 21, no. 2 (1998): 242–69. <https://doi.org/10.1080/014198798330007> P 256

war. Moreover, the tendency of ignoring women's meaningful role in the war history stemmed from the fact that most women participated in the war in their own private sphere. However, women played a valuable role in both private and in the public sphere during the war. During the WWII, the Vietnam War, the American Civil War, and in recent wars, there are numerous examples of women's participation simultaneously from both the public and the private sphere.

Analyzing the role of women in political conflicts, Rosemary Ridd acknowledges that women do have power on non-public roles, but this is usually depoliticized because this power (in private sphere) does not give them the authority to legitimate their actions in society.³⁸ Thus, the question arises: Is women's engagement only valid when women work outside the domestic sphere? In this regard, Julie Peteet, an anthropologist who extensively researched on links between women and struggle, writes:

*The mobilization of the domestic sector during a protracted crisis disputes any facile dichotomy between formal and informal spheres, and domestic and public domains, when a community is under attack... domestic boundaries are shattered, revealing the illusory character of domesticity as the realm of private familial relations distanced from the spheres of formal politics.*³⁹

The private sphere of Bangladeshi women was hardly revolutionary— cooking, looking after the family, the children, and their husbands. However, the very same mothers, sisters, or wives supported the warriors in different ways - they prepared food, tended to the wounded, worked as messengers, hid arms, and lastly, sent their dearest ones to the war; the domestic and the political merged to blur the boundary between the private and public spheres. The Bangladeshi women's

³⁸ Rosemary Ridd and Helen Callaway, *Women and Political Conflict: Portraits of Struggle in Times of Crisis* (New York: New York University Press, 1987) p 246

³⁹ Julie Peteet. 'Women and the Palestinian Movement: No Going Back?' in Joseph Suad, and Susan Slyomovics. *Women and Power in the Middle East*. (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001) P.138

activities in the private sphere influenced as much their activities in the public sphere as their roles in the public domain influenced their roles in the private domain.

A mother's sacrifice of her son – a supreme political act – turns the mother into a symbol of the trauma of exile and resistance; thus, a nationalist mother teaches her children to be nationalists. In the context of Bangladesh, women directly participated in the liberation war and indulged in political activism. Some of these women belonged to various professions such as doctors, nurses, social workers, house assistants, and employed professionals. Although the majority of them were housewives, some of these women fought as guerillas inside Bangladesh and some of them worked as nurses and doctors in the hospitals for the freedom fighters in the refugee camps in India. Famous Bengali poet Sufia Kamal led Bangladesh Women's Society that worked to motivate people, men and women alike, to join the war. Women such as Momtaj Begum, Kazi Rokeya, Baby Moudud, Rokeya Kabeer, and Monira Aktar worked to mobilize public opinion and underwent rigorous physical fitness training. These women learnt to use firearms and provided first-aid and self-defence training in different communities in Bangladesh. Badrunnessa Ahmed worked as the chief leader of Women's Forum of Mujibnagar in 1971 and Begum Khurshid worked as a journalist and an editor of different media. Preeti Rani Das Purakayastha led the Women Freedom Fighters' Committee. Geeta Naath, Nibedita Das, Shudha Kar, Manju Debi, Sushoma Das, and Rama Rani Das too were on this committee.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Dr. Tanzina Al- Mizan, “ মুক্তিযুদ্ধে নারীর ভূমিকাও গৌরবোজ্জ্বল (Women's role in liberation War is also glorious),” in *The Daily Jugantor* December 20, 2018, to see this article (<https://www.jugantor.com/todays-paper/window/123919/%E0%A6%AE%E0%A7%81%E0%A6%95%E0%A7%8D%E0%A6%A4%E0%A6%BF%E0%A6%AF%E0%A7%81%E0%A6%A6%E0%A7%8D%E0%A6%A7%E0%A7%87-%E0%A6%A8%E0%A6%BE%E0%A6%B0%E0%A7%80%E0%A6%B0-%E0%A6%AD%E0%A7%82%E0%A6%AE%E0%A6%BF%E0%A6%95%E0%A6%BE%E0%A6%93>)

While these actions by women did not challenge the domesticity, they nonetheless broadened the tasks and the political significance associated with it. Often remaining within the private sphere, women not only contributed to the public struggle, but they also substantially participated in the war. Women's roles both in the public and the private spheres were equally valuable and meaningful. Their significance in the liberation war cannot be ignored on the basis of separate spheres – more so when a serious crisis broke through the barriers between these spheres.

My thesis argues that women's presence in the 1971 liberation war was not simply restricted to them being vulnerable victims of brutal sexual assault, but they also fought as guerillas, as informers, as nurses, as motivators, and raised funds. My thesis will highlight these various roles played by women in the war rather than discussing sexual violence. This approach will introduce a fresh perspective in the history of women in the liberation war of Bangladesh.

Chapter 3:

Women's Role in Political Sphere in 1971

As noted earlier, women of Bengal had a long historical background of political activism, especially in anti-colonial movements. Matia Chowdhury and Sajeda Chowdhury were some of the most notable figures in political sphere during the war. Sufia Kamal played a significant role in organizing women's associations and different processions. Pakistan's general election in October 1970 was postponed due to floods. On April 4, 1970, under the leadership of Sufia Kamal the 'Purba Bangla Mahila Parishad(East Pakistan Women's Council)' was established. Issues like the establishment of Parliament with sovereign powers and direct elections in the seats reserved for women, the release of royal prisoners, the elimination of wage discrimination for women workers, establishment of adequate number of maternity homes, establishment of children's hospitals, stopping adulteration of food, reduction of prices of goods, along with the demand of stopping the torture of women, and the demand of establishing equal rights of women were raised at that time by East Pakistan Mahila Parishad. In the background of the liberation war, branches of "East Pakistan Women's Council" were formed under the leadership of Sufia Kamal in many districts including Barisal, Mymensingh, and Chittagong. Manaroma Basu led in Barisaal along with Pushpa Nag, Rani Bhattacharya, Sajeda Motin, and Krishna Chand. Umratul Fajal led in Chittagong accompanied by Mushtari Shufi, Roma Dutt, Nurjahan Khan, Geeta Ghosh, Dil Afroja Dilo, and Seema Chakrabarti; Rakiba Khatun in Pabna, in Sylhet Usha Das Purkayosta, Selina Banu in Comilla, Sufia Karim in Mymensingh, Hena Das at Narayanganj, Juthika Chatterjee, Gouri Naha, and Fowjia Parvin at Narsingdi. Along with Sufia Kamal, the women leaders visited many districts in 1971. Ignoring their families, they rushed from house to house with the message

of organising resistance in the tumultuous days of March. March 22 was the last visit of Sufia Kamal, Maleka Begum, and other leaders in the preparatory phase of the liberation war.⁴¹ After the 1970 elections, female Awami League members of the National Assembly were assigned specific tasks during the Liberation war. Badrunessa Ahmed was the president of Mujib Nagar women rehabilitation activities and women's organization of Mujib Nagar. On the instructions of Tajuddin Ahmad, the Prime Minister of the Provisional Government of Bangladesh, she gave reports after visiting the refugee camps. One of her main duties was to oversee the proper distribution of medical and other relief materials among the refugees and the training of refugee women fighters.⁴²

In 1971 a good number of women showed their courage working as diplomats in Mujibnagar Sarkar.⁴³ Begum Nurjahan Murshid was remarkable among them. She was sent along with the leaders of Mujibnagar Government to hold talks with the President and the Prime Minister of India. She, as a representative team member, met the following Indian dignitaries: Sardar Sharan Singh, the Minister of External Affairs; Jagjivan Ram, the Defence Minister; Dheelan, the Speaker of the Parliament; and the opposition Party leader Farrukh Ali Ahmad.⁴⁴ Nurjahan Murshid publicised

⁴¹ Maleka Begum. *Muktijuddhe nari*. P 38-50

⁴² Maleka Begum. *Muktijuddhe Nari*. P. 129

⁴³ Mujibnagar Government, the government constituted at Mujibnagar to conduct the Bangladesh war of liberation, was formed on 10 April 1971 after the declaration of independence on 26 March 1971. The Mujibnagar government headed by Tajuddin Ahmad took oath on 17 April 1971 at Mujibnagar. On 10 April a government was formed comprising the top ranking leaders of Awami League. The incumbents of the government were: Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman – President, Syed Nazrul Islam – Vice President, (entrusted with the powers, functions, and responsibilities of the President since the President himself was then detained in Pakistan). Tajuddin Ahmad, Prime Minister, in charge of Defence, Information, Broadcasting and Communications, Economic Affairs, Planning Division, Education, Local Government, Health, Labour, Social Welfare, establishment as well as other affairs the responsibility of which was not yet entrusted to anyone. Khondakar Mostaq Ahmad – Minister, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Law and Parliamentary Affairs. M Mansur Ali – Minister, Ministry of Finance, Industry and Commerce. AHM Qamaruzzaman- Minister, Ministry of Home, Civil Supplies, Relief and Rehabilitation, Agriculture. For details please visit the following link: https://en.banglapedia.org/index.php/Mujibnagar_Government

⁴⁴ Badrun Nahar khan. '*Muktijuddhe Narir Abodan(Contribution of Women in Liberation War)*'. (Dhaka: Joybangla Academy,2019). Pp. 18,73

the cause of Bangladesh liberation war in the associated session at both houses of the Indian parliament in Delhi. Her speech was published in the newspapers which severely anguished the Pakistan government. Consequently, the Pakistan president ordered fourteen years of imprisonment and confiscation of her property. Courageously, she visited different provinces (states) of India to turn public opinion in favour of liberation war and against the atrocities committed by Pakistan army. Badrunnessa Ahmed was elected as a member of National Council in 1970 election. She was entrusted the responsibility of 'Mujib Nagar Women Rehabilitation and Women Association.' She performed various duties under the instructions of the Prime Minister of the Expatriate Government, Tajuddin Ahmad.⁴⁵ National Assembly (Women Seat-6) member Momtaj Begum said in her interview that on 1st April 1971 she went to Comilla and stayed in Kasba and tried to build resistance with Ansar and local Chhatra League workers. When the government of Bangladesh was formed on April 17, Momtaj Begum was the only female member present in Mujib Nagar. Matia Chowdhury and Maleka Begum participated at the International Women's Association at Delhi and roused public opinion for the liberation war as well as freedom fighters of Bangladesh. Officials of all foreign missions stationed in Dhaka used to liaise with Begum Sufia Kamal. She also used to deliver important messages and letters to the responsible officials.⁴⁶ Under the initiative of Shamsaad, a nursing student of Dhaka Nursing School, on 18th March 1971 Thursday, at 9 am Girls' Students Association led a seminar at central Shaheed Minar.⁴⁷ Mrs. Mushtari Shafi mentions in her book *Swadhinota Amar Rokto Jhora Din (Liberation : my blood soaked days)* that the Craft Institute Hostel in Agartala was developed as a shelter for

⁴⁵ Maleka Begum, 'Muktijuddhe Nari'. P. 146

⁴⁶ Badrun Nahar Khan. 'Muktijuddhe Narir Abodan'. P 18-73

⁴⁷ 'Daily Azad'. Founder: Moulana Mohammad Akram Khan, DVD- 73 March-April. Published: 18th March, Thursday 1971. Bangladesh Archive.

all progressive organizing men and women including National Awami Party (NAP) and Communist Party.⁴⁸

⁴⁸ Begum Mushtari Shafi. *Swadhinata Amar Rokto Jhora Din (A Memoir of Bangladesh Liberation War)*. (Dhaka: Murdhanya Publication, 2019), P. 187

Chapter 4

Roots under the earth: Women in supporting roles

A dominant narrative in history of women's contribution to the liberation war centres on stories of sexual violence or losses of family such as children and spouses. The story of their heroic performances has been largely overlooked. Despite individual initiatives of writing women's heroic participation in the war, there has been no large-scale institutional or governmental exercise to reflect on the role of female freedom fighters. It has been half a century since Bangladesh secured freedom. But there is no document that provides the total number of women freedom fighters across the country and information on them.⁴⁹ The scattered archives contributed to produce silences on the experiences of women, common people, and minorities. Thus, women have never been integral to the history of Bangladesh's liberation war.

This chapter is titled 'Roots under the earth' – it compares the role of women to the roots of a giant tree. The roots of the tree remain under the earth to support its body on the earth. Women were such roots during the liberation war of Bangladesh. They played a crucial role to support freedom fighters. I grew up hearing how my mother used to convey intelligence to freedom fighters. She would tell stories about cleaning and hiding weapons. However, I never heard my mother call herself a freedom fighter. But, she always proudly says that her brother is a certified freedom fighter as he was a combatant. Supporting as informers, carrier of arms, organizers, care givers, motivators, raising funds, and fighting as guerillas donning male attire – all were invaluable contributions. Books⁵⁰ published on the testimony of women in the liberation war point to

⁴⁹ While researching at the Bangladesh National War Museum (BNWM) I asked for any available list of women freedom fighters. Then, the research officer of BNWM repressed her pity in deep breath and shared her endeavor to enlist a real woman freedom fighter who is still not mentioned in the government list of freedom fighters.

⁵⁰ To conduct this research I have collected many books whose names I have added to the bibliography.

aforementioned roles. Some of these women fought as guerillas, some as cultural workers, some as organizers; some were victims of brutal torture, while others faced potential mortal danger in their besieged country and closely observed the unfolding events.⁵¹ How would the nation consist of without women? After the war women rebuilt everything from scratch, including broken families. Women kept the society's pulse alive and running. In 1971, women also took on male roles in many cases, especially where men were absent. The ultimate goal of all roles they played was to survive, manage society and family, and nurture humanity. Thus, the history of 1971 is incomplete without women. This chapter sheds light on the roots – on women's supporting roles during the war.

During the war, a ubiquitous yet significantly helpful act was providing food and shelters to the freedom fighters and the helpless people who walked days to reach the Indian border. Momotaj Begum was a teenage girl during the war. An old graveyard near their house was a hideout for many freedom fighters. She used to secretly deliver food to the graveyard for the freedom fighters. The collaborators of Pakistani regime suspected another family for helping freedom fighters and burnt their house. During the war, collaborators were a cause of great fear for the common populace.⁵² Zebunnessa Begum recalls that basketfuls of puffed rice mixed with molasses and shredded coconuts were very common requirements to fulfil. Her eldest son was the Thana Commander of the freedom fighters in Kochua police station. He used to bring 25 to 30 fighters to Sachar and Lonai. It was quite risky to accommodate so many *Muktis* (freedom fighters)

⁵¹ Watching documentaries by Afsan Chowdhury on women in the Liberation struggle. Atek Shuvo, Women struggle in 1971 freedom fight of Bangladesh- "Their fight," April 9, 2015. <https://youtu.be/GbWbZXCr1pU>. Ekattor TV, Rana Khetre Nari, Nari MuktiJoddha, March 22, 2021. <https://youtu.be/70eQx5ovVdU>.

⁵² Khadija Nahar Eity is a lecturer of Barishal College. Her father was an armed freedom fighter(Not Gazetted) but not her mother. Eity shared this when I interviewed her.

together because of *Razakars* (collaborators)⁵³. Thus, they were accommodated in different houses in the locality, one in each house. Poorer families could not provide anything substantial, but they tried their best to provide whatever they could to the freedom fighters.

Women were remarkably good at cleaning and hiding guns in a safe place during the war. Zebunnessa Begum recalls how she had to devise cunning methods to hide weapons brought by the guerillas. Guns, dynamite, rifles, revolvers, Chinese rifles, SLRs, LMGs – all were ferried in light boats and moved secretly into her father's house. Covered chicken poops were removed and pits dug underneath overnight. Cautious guards stationed around the village kept watch, so collaborators or other villagers could not even sense what was happening and divulge information. Wooden planks were laid on the bottom of pits, then bamboo mats and hay were spread over those to store guns.⁵⁴ She added that extra guns were used to train young village boys and girls in the courtyard of her father's home. Girls were responsible for looking after guns. She says, "We used to work during the night, rather than in the day, in the rooms where the firewood was stored, lest some village women saw us and talked. After all, you could not trust everyone. You never know who was on which side. Fuel wood was removed at night to store bullets in cooking utensils, big tin canisters, and earthen jars filled with rice husk. The husk was used to prevent weapons becoming damp in the rainy season. We had to hide these tin canisters in the holes which we dug under the chicken coops. All this digging and coving the place with firewood meant that we had

⁵³ Emerged from a Pakistani word, *Razakar* means 'volunteers'. This loosely constituted group of non Bengali (often Urdu-speaking Bihari) and Bengali men, were Pakistan supporters and pro-Jamat-i-Islam in their political affiliation. Most *Razakars* operated at a local level and provided information and assistance to the Pakistan Army in apprehending, arresting and committing violence against Bengalis who were supporting or fighting for freedom against the Pakistan state. Saikia. *Women war and the Making of Bangladesh Remembering 1971*. P.125

⁵⁴ *Rising from the Ashes Women's Narratives of 1971*, (Dhaka: The University press Limited, Original Bangla Edition by Ain O Salish Kendra, 2001). Pp. 20-23

to work all night long. Also, we needed to take out items as and when required. We were afraid of the Pakistan army and the traitors.”⁵⁵

Thus, hiding arms and sheltering freedom fighters at home involved great risks. Often women had to wisely choose safe places and people. Begum Mushtari Shafi counted on her nearest and dearest ones. Mushtari Lodge in Chittagong was a safe haven for freedom fighters. Many leaders and organizers used this place as a base. Even the idea of *Swadhin Bangla Betar Kendra* (Independent Bangladesh Radio) was first conceptualised at her house. Assured by Chowdhury Harun-or-Rashid, they hid two trunks of guns for the freedom fighters to use. On 27th March, 1971 two trunks were brought to Mushtari Lodge. On 7th April, 1971 two Pakistani majors raided the house, seized the trunks, and arrested Dr. Shafi, husband of Begum Mushtari, and his brother in law Khandakar Ehsanul Haque – they never came back. Begum Mushtari escaped on foot with her seven children during the night. Later on, in Kolkata she managed to work as a motivating elocutionist at Bangladesh Radio.⁵⁶ Masuda’s in-laws’ house was an important shelter for freedom fighters and the leaders of Students’ Union. Many weapons were hidden under the ground in the bushes around their house on the banks of the Shitalaksha River. When the freedom fighters brought weapons, they were given to Masuda, and she used to hide them. Showing her hands, she reminisced, “For a long time, my hands were destroyed by holding this ammunition, poisonous substance. It was almost useless.” Pointing at her feet, she said, “I still have to wear socks on my feet because then I could not always wear shoes or carry ammunition with protection. Somehow something got stuck in my leg and I am still suffering from that injury.” One day the freedom fighters stored their arms; tipped off, the Pakistani army raided their home. The freedom fighters hid weapons in the

⁵⁵ *Rising from the Ashes Women’s Narratives of 1971*, p20-23

⁵⁶ Begum Mushtari Shafi. *Swadhinota amar Roktojhora din*.

abandoned latrine and hid in the dirt for several hours until the army left the house. Masuda recalled, "...Another day, my husband brought Three Not Three rifles to our place. My mother-in-law saw the army approaching. She covered those weapons with a cloth and kept them under her bed a little farther inside. And in front of that she put my husband's sitar (musical instrument), covered with another cloth. When the army came and searched the house, they checked under the bed and shouted, "Mukti mil gaya (we found freedom fighter)." My mother-in-law came forward and said, "...Yeh to Sitar hai. Ganabajana ki hay (it is a Sitar, a musical instrument)." Then, the army threw it away and left. Thus, they were saved on that occasion.⁵⁷

While many people took refuge in India during the war, many other families, however, were reluctant to leave the country and helped the freedom fighters. Avoiding Pakistani collaborators like *Albadar* and *Razakar*, and clandestinely helping the freedom fighters was a great life threatening risk – no less courageous than participating in combat. Women like Sufia Kamal and Jahanara Imam – well-known Bengali literary figures – courageously remained in the country and helped freedom fighters. Masuda Begum was also one such lady who did not move to a safer place and stayed behind for her country.

Sheltering freedom fighters was one of the riskiest tasks, which women did with great valour. Selina Hossain shares an incident involving an old lady from Barguna when I interviewed her in April 2022. The old lady was alone at home, and used to help freedom fighters. One day, two freedom fighters came running to her place and requested her to hide their arms. They were in a

⁵⁷ Masuda Sultana was around 18 during the war. She was a guerrilla of left, Communist Party of Bangladesh (CPB) in 1971. She shared her experiences in an interview at her place on April 23, 2022. Her husband was dedicated to the communist politics. Resistance was strong at Second Dhakeshwery Cotton Mill, Adamji Jute Mill, and Chitta Ranjan Avenue. Their house was located in the same area. At home she learnt the usage of the Three Not Three Rifle, anti-personnel mine, smoke grenade 77, and hand grenade etc. She used to carry antipersonnel mine for own safety. During the war they could not take refuge on the request of CPB leader's request. Renowned in their neighbourhood, the Pakistani Army used to visit her in-laws' house often. Moreover, it was one of the biggest shelter bases of freedom fighters. So, they stayed inside the country despite the risk of their lives.

hurry because after an operation nearby they had to run away due to lack of bullets. Two Pakistani soldiers were hot on their heels. Giving their guns to her, the freedom fighters hid in the paddy field and asked the old lady to go away from there. The old lady hid their guns in the shallow waters of a pond but did not go elsewhere. She said if she did not stay there, the Pakistani army would definitely search the paddy field and find them easily, because the field was not dense. The old lady waited on the way to the paddy field. In a flash the Pakistani army entered her house and asked, “Mukti kidhar gaya (Where are the freedom fighters)?” She could not answer anything as she did not speak Urdu; she shook her head to convey that she did not know anything. Enraged, the Pakistani army shot her dead and left. The old lady sacrificed her life to save the freedom fighters.

Every woman, it is said, has innate qualities of a mother. This holds true when we analyse women’s role during the war. Their maternal instincts made them protect freedom fighters and nurse war victims injured by the enemy. In her book *The Golden Age*, Tahmina Anam beautifully illuminates this role of women through Rehana’s character. Rehana risked her life to rescue a freedom fighter from the custody of Pakistani Army and sheltered a wounded freedom fighter (A Major of the Pakistani Army) at her home, concealing him from even her children and friends.⁵⁸

Differences in social status defined to an extent the role that women played. Documents of higher class or educated class women are easy to locate. However, such women were not many. The peasant classes were more integrated into the war. Interviews of the women who lived in the slums of Dhaka during the war tell us about Razia Begum, who accommodated freedom fighters and supported them with whatever money she had; Rabeya Khatun who sheltered two Hindu girls even

⁵⁸ Tahmina Anam. “*The Golden Age*” (Toronto: Harper Collins Publishers Ltd, 2007), pp. 112-153

after being widowed by the *Albadar*(traitors); Rahima Begum who let freedom fighters turn her house into a camp; and Manjema Khatun who cooked food for the freedom fighters.⁵⁹

Inclusion of women in the list of freedom fighters is very recent in the public sphere as a new public memory about 1971 had been actively growing and circulating since 1996.⁶⁰ The role of women in 1971 became a much debated issue for politicians during elections. In 2001, politicians invoked the brutal violence of 1971 and demanded redress. Bengali men were deemed war heroes; and *Razakars* (traitors). In this new discourse the most banal argument between the Awami League and the Bangladesh National Party (BNP) was: Who was the first to declare freedom? Who was the first hero? This national political discourse tried to create a test of 1971 without any serious investigation into the historical events and outcomes. In this seemingly fluid stage of historical test production, women were tellingly absent and whenever inserted appeared as victims. The memory of sexual violence done to Bengali women was used by politicians to mobilise anger against Pakistani enemies and *Razakars* several decades later.⁶¹

In this liberation war women played multifarious role which, however, did not receive due recognition in the mainstream history of Bangladesh. As noted earlier, Bangabandhu called the sexually violated women as *Biranagana* (Brave woman), recognised them as war-heroines, and declared the war-victim women as his daughters. After the war society refused to accept those sexually victimised women. Then, Bangabandhu declared himself as their father and came forward to help those helpless women to be rehabilitated. But, unfortunately the brave women who worked for freedom and women in different ways were not accepted as warriors. Before or

⁵⁹ Rokeya Kabir and Muzib Mehedy *Muktijuddha o Nari (Women's Contribution in Liberation War of Bangladesh)* . (Dhaka: Oitijjhya, 2022), p. 188

⁶⁰ Saikia. *Women, War and the Making of Bangladesh Remembering 1971*, P. 85

⁶¹ *ibid*

during the war women performed different roles: political, social, economic, and in combat. At present women freedom fighters are being provided with different types of government funds – liquid or cash. But, no school or college textbooks mention women freedom fighters with grace till now.

i) Women's Role as nurse and motivator:

Nursing is a fundamental prerequisite in wars. In 1971, many courageous women worked as nurses during the war inside and outside the country. However, we know mostly about refugee women and girls who served as nurses at the border camps and hospitals. In this regard, Sonamura Melaghar, Bislamganj Hospital in Agartala, India was a remarkable example. Sultana Kamal Lulu, Saida Kamal Tulu, Khuku Ahmed, Dalia Salahuddin, Padma, Neelima, Anupama, Asma, Minubillah, Reshma, Zakia, Naila Lubna, and Geeta Mazumder etc., courageously joined the hospitals to nurse injured freedom fighters.⁶² Not all of them were experienced in healthcare. Khuku Ahmed remembers an instance when a nurse fainted after a fighter seriously wounded by bomb was hospitalised. It was not easy to adjust to the hospital, injuries, and gory scenes of blood for normal people.⁶³ Holding the torch light during surgeries, threading the needle, and applying bandage were initial activities, then, they gradually administered medicines and gave injections – recalls Sultana Kamal Tulu.⁶⁴

⁶² Khuku Ahmed repeatedly mentioned these names when I interviewed her on April 24, 2022. I also found these names in a book written by freedom fighter Major (ret'd), Bir Bikram Dr. Captain Akhtar, '*Bar Bar Fire Jai (I Return Again and Again)*' First edition, (Dhaka: The University Press Limited, 2000). Reprint edition (Dhaka: Dynamic Printers, 2012). pp. 172, 206.

⁶³ Freedom fighter Khuku Ahmed shared this memory with me when I interviewed her. I asked her if they were scared to see bloodied soldiers. Tulu one day fainted after seeing so much blood. However, she also said that she was personally neither scared nor thought of it. The time was so challenging that the sole aim was to work for the people, and to help freedom fighters as much as possible. Khuku Ahmed worked at Sonamura Melaghar Camp hospital as nurse with her husband, freedom fighter Dr. Akhtar.

⁶⁴ Sultana Kamal. *Attakotha Nilimar Niche*. (Dhaka: Pearl Publications, 2010), p. 50. Khuku Ahmed also told me the same description while taking her interview on April 24, 2022.

Enduring political turmoil inside the country was much more challenging while working as doctors and nurses. At a Dhaka polyclinic Dr. Azizur Rahman and his wife treated wounded freedom fighters and did surgeries too, if required.⁶⁵ Medical student and guerilla fighter Nira Lahiri sacrificed her life while saving freedom fighters.⁶⁶ Begum Mushtari Shafi visited hospitals and camps to talk to freedom fighters, listened to their agonies, and offering motivational talk to inspire them. She worked at Swadhin Bangla Betar as motivational elocutionist.⁶⁷

Syeda Sajeda Chowdhury took the initiative to train women for the war in Kolkata Gobra camp, during the liberation war, the only women freedom fighter training camp approved by the Mujibnagar government was known as the Gobra camp and it was established in between the Padmapukur and Park Circus areas in Kolkata. Geeta Mazumder, when she was about fifteen or sixteen years old, fled with her family to Kolkata.⁶⁸ She felt urged to do something for the country. Her relatives helped her join a nursing training camp led by Sajeda Chowdhury, where women were trained as nurses and motivators. There she was trained to provide first aid, to give injections, and to groom patients.

Women were also trained to escape in case of an enemy attack, tie knots on the rope, and to crawl; they received political education too. Ila Mitra was one of the teachers.⁶⁹ They were given first-

⁶⁵ Badrun Nahar Khan. 'Muktijuddhe Narir Abodan' Pp115-116

⁶⁶ Neera Lahiry. *Muktijoddha Nipa(Freedom fighter Nipa)*, a biography of a Medical student Nipa Lahiry. (Dhaka: Abishkar 2017)

⁶⁷ Begum Mushtari Shafi. "Swadhinota amar Raktajhora Din" Mushtari Shafi describes V.M Hospital, Agartala, Polytechnic institute. Hyapania Camp, Rajbari refugee camp, "Someone called me all of a sudden. I found a girl who was rescued by the freedom fighters calling me. I recognised her, Toni, it was 40 days since she gave birth to a child. Her husband was major Nurul Islam Shishu who joined freedom war, leaving her at home...we told her to keep quiet, listening to the tremendous torture she experienced...she was desperate to share her unspoken sorrows. Words poured out of her, she was adamant to tell her story, the torture of the barbaric Pakistani regime. Keeping her feeble hand on my hand she said, 'see sister...' they pierced needles in each of her fingers. I shivered, feeling that pain over all my body once again..." Pp. 236-239

⁶⁸ Geeta Majumdar. Freedom fighter nurse. I interviewed on April 19, 2022.

⁶⁹ Mitra, Ila (1925-2002) an important communist leader and peasant movement organizer of the Indian subcontinent, especially in East Bengal. She played key role in organisation of the Nachole uprising and the Santhal

aid training at St. Johns. Post-training, Geeta worked at the Bangladesh Hospital. She, along with twenty-two mates, was assigned to go to Assam. In her words, “After training we were sent to Assam along with an army officer. His responsibility was to deliver (us) to various camps. But unfortunately, when he went to Lumding in Assam, he told us to leave on our own.” At that time, it was impossible for them to travel alone in that forested area. The senior members of the group – Anila and Anjali – managed to call Sajeda Chowdhury for instructions. They went to Guptakhali camp near Sylhet. Geeta adds, ‘There was a gentleman named Makhan Som who arranged for us to stay in the refugee camp. When we contacted Sajeda Apa (sister) again from there, she asked us to work in a temporary camp there. There was an operation on the day we reached the temporary camp. About 30-35 freedom fighters would enter Bangladesh on a mission and return after attacking the Pakistanis. But unfortunately, on reaching there, their truck crashed and the flammable material they were carrying exploded, injuring themselves. We gave primary treatment to them.’ This direct service to the freedom fighters instilled more courage instead of fear. Within few days Sajeda Chowdhury instructed the women to go to Agartala. Helped by Mr. Som again, they went to Agartala, and he handed them over to Captain Sitara. At the camp the lights could not be turned on because the border was nearby. The wounded were treated under paraffin lamps or torch light. Geeta remembers her first day at Bangladesh hospital. She saw a freedom fighter named Sanaullah who went to Akhawda, where he received grave injuries on his chest and needed blood. Dr. Faruk gave him blood and he survived. She nursed Sanaullah, tended to his wounds, and provided him with necessary medication and inspiration. Three days after the surgery Sanaullah said, ‘Let me go, I will go to fight.’ When asked if she was afraid to see such blood loss and casualties suddenly, Geeta replied, the more important task was to save the wounded freedom

fighters. Her bright eyes reflected her dedication and patriotism. This shows that it was not easy to work as nurses even though they were outside of the country. They stood the risk of being attacked any time. Khuku Ahmed shared her experience of being attacked by the Pakistan Army at Sonamura rest house where Dr. Akhtar established a temporary hospital, 'I woke up that morning. We were about to wash our hands and face. Suddenly bullets rained on us. Bombs were falling on all sides of the pond, and all the refugees were gathered around it...I didn't know where to go or what to do...a memory that still wakes me up at night, and I scream in fear.'⁷⁰

The whole period of the war was very uncertain – it was a matter of daily survival and the future was bleak. Despite such uncertainty a mother did not hesitate to send her beloved child to fight for freedom. The letter of freedom fighter Nurul Haque to his mother on 19th November 1971 provides us a glimpse of how many women motivated their sons to fight, *"My mother, hope you are doing well. But I am not doing well. How can I remain fine without you! I just think of you. We are 17 fighters. Six of them have been killed already, yet we are fighting. I think of your words only, you said, 'Khoka (an affectionate address, used for sons) bring freedom to my country.' That's why I will not get back till I make the country independent for sure..."*⁷¹

Bengali women, to some extent, exhorted their children to join the war. Female guerilla Shirin Banu Mitil remembers her aunt's words who told her children Jindan and Jinjir, "Did I raise you up to die at home defenselessly? Die after fighting, never get shot on your back ...". One of her

⁷⁰ Khuku Ahmed described this in personal interview. Also mentioned in 'Bar Bar Fire Jai,' "Khuku ke pawa jacchena, Pakistanider akromon e dishe hara hoye shobai jedike geche khuku o sedikei chole geche (Khuku can't be found, shocked by the attack of Pakistanis, Khuku must have wandered away, like the others)." P. 164

⁷¹ Salahuddin Ahmed, Amin Ahmed Choudhury, Rashid Haidar, Selina Hossain, Nasiruddin Yusuf. *Ekattorer Chithi (Letters of 71)*, (Dhaka: Prathama Prakashan.), p. 7

children was sick, so she told him, “Tie the handkerchief (gamchha) at your waist tight, you won’t feel any problem”. Her words motivated her children a lot.⁷²

Women sacrificed their beloved ones to save freedom fighters’ lives. Freedom fighter A.M.G. Kabir shared his mother’s words when he intended to join the war. Instead of preventing him, she gave him the Sten gun and said, “Depend on the Quran my son.” After the death of freedom fighter Abdul Halim Chowdhury (Jewel), his mother said, “I did not forbid him when I saw him, who loved to play cricket, take the Sten gun. How could I say no to him when I saw numerous people were being killed by the military! I knew the consequences of dedicating one’s life for freedom. So, I was not surprised to see my beloved son’s death.”⁷³ Selina Hossain’s *Hangar Nadi Grenade* features a similar example when a mother hands over her autistic son to the Pakistani army to save a freedom fighter. When I interviewed Selina Hossain, she recalled an incident involving the wife of a boatman who refused to ferry the freedom fighters, afraid of being killed by Pakistani army. But, the boatman’s wife came out with a *Bnoti* (Vegetables and fish cutter used in Bangladesh) and yelled at the boatman to carry the freedom fighters safely; otherwise, she threatened to slit his throat. That day around 17 freedom fighters were saved because of that lady. Mothers did not want any rewards, but only well-being of the country. Mother of martyred freedom fighters Kalam and Salam refused the donation of 100/-taka given by the government and said, “This country got liberty in return of my children’s soul. I wish nobody would forget them and the martyrs. I pray from the bottom of my heart to Allah, May the country be well!”⁷⁴ Shaheed Janani Jahnara Imam told her son Rumi, “I sacrifice you for the country, go join the war.”⁷⁵ One day a mother handed

⁷² Saidujjaman Rowshan; Tushar Abdullah. *Ekattorer Agnikanya (Revolutionary Women of 1971)*. (Dhaka: Anupam Publishing, 1997), pp. 11-13

⁷³ Maleka Begum, *Muktijuddhe Nari (Women in the Freedom war)* p. 156

⁷⁴ Ibid. P.157

⁷⁵ Jahnara Imam. *Ekattorer Dinguli (Memoirs of the Days of Bangladesh Liberation War, 1971)*, (Dhaka: Sondhani Prokashoni, 1986), P. 158

over her only autistic child with an LMG rifle to the Pakistan army to save two freedom fighters who took shelter at her house. When freedom fighters learnt the truth and asked why she did so, she answered, “You have to fight more.” Children are most precious to a woman. Women did not hesitate to sacrifice their children for freedom. I read this anecdote in the book published in 1976, representing the narratives of women’s patriotism and sacrifice of a mother in 1971. Sacrificing children and husbands in war is a great loss for women. Many women supported the freedom war although their husbands were collaborators. After independence the freedom fighters killed or punished some of those collaborators. Once a *Razakar*, chairman of peace committee, was carried away by the freedom fighters, on December 17, to be killed – his wife stood unaffected. His relatives told her, “You go and tell the freedom fighters not to punish him.” But the wife refused. After the freedom fighters killed the collaborator, the wife came to them and said, “He used to bring many young girls from their homes and tortured them in front of my eyes, if I resisted, he beat me.” Selina Hossain narrated this incident when I interviewed her.⁷⁶ This extraordinary woman, despite knowing she would become a widow, did not submit to injustice. Women were not scared to make sacrifices due to their nationalism. They considered it as a necessary price to pay, to sacrifice something significant to secure freedom. Country and liberty became their priorities.

ii) **Women’s role as fund raiser:** Women played a vital role in raising funds. They collected money and kept in their secret piggy bank – in rural Bangladesh normally women used to keep their surplus money in a clay made bank, or in any secret bag or a bamboo made pillar. Women collected from their relatives and friends who supported freedom war. As a

⁷⁶ Selina Hossain’s Husband was a freedom fighter in sector 9. The boys of the area came to join the war and informed them of a peace committee chairman of their area. In person interview on April 25, 2022.

mother and as a provider of monetary support, Jahanara Imam herself was a guerrilla fighter. During the war, she provided every possible service to the freedom fighters with money, food, medicine, and shelter. She used to send money and medicines when freedom fighters came to her house on Elephant Road, Dhaka. Begum Sufia Kamal is another significant figure who supported the freedom fighters in various ways. She collected money, medicine, old clothes, and food from others, and secretly sent those to the freedom fighters.⁷⁷ Mahfuja Khanam stayed in Dhaka at the behest of Communist Party; she assisted Sufia Kamal, Jahanara Imam, and used to maintain contact with Shahidullah Kaiser (novelist). She used to deliver to the freedom fighters chemicals collected from the Chemistry Department of Dhaka University and cyclostyling leaflet from the cyclostyle machine at Notre Dame College. Moreover, she not only sheltered the freedom fighters at her house, but she also transported arms and ammunition to destined places. She collected money, medicine, and old clothes for the freedom fighters⁷⁸. Concealed at different bases, Faizunnessa Begum, along with her daughters, worked for the liberation war. They guarded weapons, manufactured grenades, procured information, and supplied food to the guerrilla fighters from Bangshal base. A freedom fighter from Aati area of Keraniganj used to collect medicines and money from Sultan Pharmacy in Rathkhola, a drugstore in Tekerhat and kept them at the Bangshal base. Then, these were sent to Dr. Fauzia Begum by the freedom fighters.⁷⁹ Teenager Linu Haque donated her piggy bank savings for the freedom war.⁸⁰

During their staying in the refugee camps, many women worked to raise funds for the

⁷⁷ Badrun Nahar Khan. *Muktijuddhe Narir Abodan*, P. 63. Mahfuja Khanam, former Dhaka University central student Union (DUCSU) leader, women organizer, Bangladeshi academic, and social activist. She is the current president of Asiatic Society of Bangladesh. Interview mentioned in *Muktijuddhe Narir Abodan*.

⁷⁸ Ibid. Pp. 63, 64.

⁷⁹ Nahid Jamal Rianan. *Muktijuddher Katha*, 'Daily Dinkal' woman's page, mentioned in '*Muktijuddhe Narir Abodan*' pp. 64,65.

⁸⁰ Linu Haque, in person interview on April 17, 2022 at 3.32pm at Uttara, Dhaka.

refugee camps. Begum Mushtari Shafi, Maleka Begum, Makduma Nargis, Fowzia Moslem, and Ayesha Khanam are some of them. Begum Shafi, along with other women, met Mrs. Dias, wife of the Tripura governor, who assured them of funds for the Ranipur and Melaghar refugee camps.⁸¹ People who supported the liberation war helped freedom fighters as much as possible they could.

iii) **Fight of uterus & sexual violence:** Selina Hossein, a famous Bangladeshi author, highlighted how women were perceived, in general, and why such a perspective is narrow in the following extract of her novel *Yuddha* (War), published in 1998: “I have lost my leg in the war,” a frustrated Makhon said.

“So what? War is like that. Women too lost their organs despite not joining the war,” Beni replied.

“How?” Makhon asks.

“A woman becomes pregnant once she is raped, that is not motherhood. That is wound of the uterus.” Beni shot back. Selina Hossein highlights *Birangana* women as freedom fighters in her works, and places the loss of both males and females on an equal pedestal. Neither of them were inferior. Thus, I have christened this paragraph as fight of uterus.

Some female freedom fighters volunteered for espionage. They established romantic liaisons with Pakistani officers or soldiers to honey-trap them, and conveyed politico-military intelligence to the freedom fighters. One of such figures is Bhagirathi whose child and husband were killed by the Pakistani army. To avenge her loss, she honey-trapped Pakistani army personnel. She earned their trust through sexual relationship with soldiers, and she regularly passed information about their activities and planning to the freedom fighters. One night, she lured three Pakistani soldiers to a

⁸¹ Begum Mushtari Shafi. *Swadhinota Amar Rokto Jhora Din*, pp. 248-249

house to spend the night and informed the freedom fighters who killed the soldiers before daybreak. Unfortunately, the Pakistani Army sensed Bhagirathi's involvement and arrested her. They tortured her mercilessly, tied her to the back of the motorcycle, and rode around the city at high speed. When they still felt her pulse, they tied her two legs to two jeeps and drove away in two opposite directions. Bhagirathi split into two. With those two parts, the two jeeps went around the city again, eventually they dumped her corpse on the road. The freedom fighters of Perojpur witnessed this incident.

Priyabhashini is another freedom fighter who was continually sexually abused by the Pakistani regime. She had to visit Pakistani officers whenever they called her to their offices or camps. She has named her book, '*Nindito Nnondon(A much Maligned Paradise)*'.⁸²

Unfortunately, sexual violence against women and children is common to wars. A vulgar strategy of war is to violate ethnicity and weaken the mental strength of families, particularly men, through sexual violence on women. John Brownmiller argues that Pakistani army violated women and killed women as part of their war policy – to destroy the whole nation. Even girls of eight and septuagenarians had been sexually assaulted. Pakistani soldiers had not only assaulted Bengali women on the spot; they also abducted tens of hundreds women and forcibly held them in their military barracks for abusing them at nights. Some women might have been raped as many as eighty times in a night.⁸³ Famous writer of Bangladesh Selina Hossein illuminates *Birangana* women as freedom fighter in her writings. While I interviewed her on this issue, her words expressed deep agony, "Rape and sexual violation were the strategies of the enemy [Pakistani

⁸² Ferdousy Priyabhashini. *Nindito Nnondon(A much Maligned Paradise)*, (Dhaka: Shobdoshoily, 2014). Priyabhashini was the first woman who shared her terrible experience, and grief in 1971 in her biography *Nindito Nnondon*.

⁸³ Susan Brownmiller. *Against our Will: Men, Women and Rape*. (New York: Open Road Integrated Media, Ink, 1975). P.83

regime] in the war. By doing this they intended to destroy the ethical and moral confidence of freedom fighters, and to sap their mental strength”.

Women brutally victimised in 1971 were declared as *Birangana* – war heroines – by Bangabandhu. However, post-independence women’s role in the liberation war has been mostly depicted as *Birangana*, sexually brutalised. Movies, ‘go as you like’ competitions featured women as only *Birangana*, an ‘*abnormal*’⁸⁴ lady (mentally unstable because of rape). In exhibitions, films, dramas, poems, paintings, and national addresses – everywhere women had been eulogized as *Birangana* in the post-war era of Bangladesh.⁸⁵ Therefore, rape is the index and symbol of women’s participation in the liberation war. Selina Hossain says that in a war woman are no less than warriors – addressing them simply as raped women is unjust. Selina Hossain piqued the thoughts of society in her books using the words like ‘disgraced women’ and ‘assaulted women’. Moreover, in 1971, women played a glorious role, which unfortunately, has been reduced to the status of a *Birangana* for years in mainstream conceptions of the war.

⁸⁴ Nayanika Mookherjee. *The Spectral Wound: Sexual Violence, Public Memories, and the Bangladesh War of 1971*. (Duke University Press, 2015). <https://muse.jhu.edu/book/70097> Mookerjee points to the visual expression in her work where she specially focuses on the word, ‘abnormal.’ “The circulation of this photograph and of other visual portrayals of the raped women of the Bangladesh war of 1971 underlines the presence of a public memory of wartime rape. It also suggests the importance in Bangladesh of visually identifying the raped woman. In fact, on a number of occasions during my fieldwork, people narrating encounters with the “raped women” would refer to the photograph: “Have you seen ‘the famous hair photograph’? The raped woman covering her face with her fist and hair? The women we saw looked very much like that. They had become “abnormal” (mentally unstable) as a result of the rape.” This comment also suggests that in the public memory of rape there exist visual ways of identifying the raped woman as “abnormal.” Here real-life encounters with the “abnormal” *Birangana* intertwine with similar portrayals of the raped woman in the existing literary and visual representations to arrive at a sedimented image of who a *Birangana* is.” Pp. xv-xx

⁸⁵ Mookherjee argues in the introduction of her book *Spectral Wound* that the history of rape was absent from the metanarrative of the Bangladesh war. Instead, it was continually invoked, especially in the state speeches and policies eulogizing the women as *Biranganas*. My argument draws upon her findings across testimonies of rape in documents from after the war (from 1972 and 1973), and as the subject of museum exhibitions and voluntary narratives of *Biranganas* in newspapers from the 1990, as well as my own readings and research. Pp. xv-xx

However, until very recently, rape was not counted as a war crime in Bangladesh. Moreover, women were neither honored as freedom fighters, nor were raped women welcomed by the society, despite being honoured as *Birangana* by Bangabandhu. What kind of identity were women assigned in the history of the 1971 war? In 1997, the book *Aami Birangana Bolichhi* (*This is Birangana Speaking*) written by the famous writer Neelima Ibrahim was published. Neelima collected this information while working in a rehabilitation center. This book presents the statements of seven rape victims. This book shows the failure of the post-war society of Bangladesh to support heroic women. Neelima says in the introduction to the book, “Today's society is more conservative than the society of 1972. They don't even feel like calling heroes sinners. So, I feel hesitant to humiliate them again from the normal life they were deprived of 25 years ago.”⁸⁶

Until recently, the state showed its reservations to consider women as freedom fighters. Bangladeshi society was a part of Pakistan. Orthodox Muslim attitudes, uneducated superstitious mentality, and patriarchal society influenced the historical perceptions of 1971. As politics and social structures evolved in the Bangladeshi state, men advanced, developed, and flourished. Conversely, women remained suppressed, ignored, and devalued. Women's ability, their capabilities, and their behavioural norms were decided by the patriarchal society. Therefore, even after half a century women freedom fighters are yet to be seriously appreciated.

Yasmin Saikiya, Nayanika Mookherjee, and many researchers especially focus on the raped women in the war, and atrocities that depict the war on and of women in 1971. Nayanika Mookherjee argues that the various socio-economic dynamics within which the ideologies of

⁸⁶ Neelima Ibrahim. *Aami Birangana Bolichhi* (*This is a Birangana speaking*). (Dhaka: Jagriti Prakashani, 1998). Neelima has written these words in the preface of the integral version expressing the impossibility of bringing out the second and third editions.

gender, honor, and shame are practiced among the *Biranganas* show that the public memory of wartime rape manifests in Bangladesh in three ways: first, the state category that designates the raped women as *Biranganas*; second, an extensive archive of visual and literary representations dating back to 1971; and third, human rights testimonies of poor and middle-class *Biranganas* since the 1990s.⁸⁷

While women were sexually brutalised by the Pakistani army as a strategy to demoralise the freedom fighters, women, sometimes, used their bodies to retaliate.

⁸⁷ Mookherjee. *The Spectral Wound: Sexual Violence, Public Memories, and the Bangladesh War of 1971*. P. xix

Chapter 5

Women as combatants

Women of Bangladesh played their vital role in many aspects, risking their own safety. During the war women and children were particularly vulnerable. So, women had to take care of their own security. Initially, women were not allowed to join combat or be on the frontline. But, later initiatives were taken to train them as guerillas. Sajeda Chowdhury started a training camp for women at Gobra where about 400 women freedom fighters were trained in combat.⁸⁸ At the end of May, 1971, the Mujib Nagar government decided to set up a training camp. Syeda Sajeda Chowdhury was entrusted with the responsibility of managing the camp. The training of women in first aid, nursing, motivation, and combat began immediately after recruiting the trainees and arranging for their accommodation and meals. They were divided into groups of 16 women to form troops. Post-training, they were sent to various fronts and hospitals to provide medical care and nurse the wounded freedom fighters.⁸⁹ Moreover, within the country, many women immediately participated in the war: Shirin Banu, Forquan Begum, Alamtaj Begum, Shobha Rani, Bithika Biswas, Taramon Bibi, and Meherunnesa are some of them.

However, as women were not officially permitted to join the war, sources on their exploits are limited. Until very recently we did not even imagine female participants in the liberation war of

⁸⁸ Parvin Akter. "Role of Bangladeshi Women in the Liberation War of 1971", *United News of Bangladesh*. December 16, 2022, <https://unb.com.bd/category/bangladesh/role-of-bangladeshi-women-in-the-liberation-war-of-1971/89975>

⁸⁹ Maleka Begum. *Muktijuddhe Nari*. P. 130.

Bangladesh. The attempt to distinguish women's role in the liberation war started in the 1990s.⁹⁰ Paucity of evidentiary documents is a common hurdle while writing a history of women's role in the war. To some extent, in the context of the 1971 liberation war, information is scarce on women during the war. Since newspapers and news media were strictly monitored by Pakistan government during the war,⁹¹ all the war stories were published after the war. Newspapers too heavily published on the heroics of men while depicting few women as motivators or supporters. In fact, throughout 1972, the headlines were about male fighters, their battle stories, how they fought, or won. These valiant stories were supported by images of wounded guerrillas and soldiers. Though there is some visual representation of women, focusing on their physical fitness training, the pictures of destitute and homeless women on a long march into the unknown as refugees were more usual. However, women participated in combat in the liberation war with arms and ammunition. Espionage is another brave job managed by women during the war. Drawing war maps and doing reconnaissance before attacks were common tasks for women. Taramon Bibi was initially chosen by Muhib Habildar as a cook. However, after seeing her interest in arms and her bravery, Taramon Bibi was assigned to espionage. On the basis of her information Khariyadanga operation was conducted.⁹² Disguised as a mad woman, she used to collect information on the Pakistani army, especially their positions. Women in the villages stocked up on farming instruments like choppers, knives, axes, and sickles, after the men had left to join the liberation

⁹⁰ Sukumar Biswas and Afsan Chawdhuri. '*Bangladesher Muktiyuddho 1971/ Nari Prottyokkhorshi o onshogrohon karir Biboron* (Freedom war of Bangladesh 1971/ Description of women eyewitnesses and participants)' (Dhaka: Liberation War Research Centre, 2007). Sukumar Biswas writes in the introduction that before the 90s women were absent from the history of the liberation war. For the first time, the Liberation War Research Center, published the details of the experiences of women from different parts of the country in 3 volumes.

⁹¹ Evacuees from Dacca Declare- 'Road to Airport a Mass grave' Saturday, April 3, 1971, AP Singapore. A British woman refugee from East Pakistan said, "We were told at gunpoint not to disclose anything about the situation in East Pakistan. If we did, it would be the last time we saw the country." in *Newspaper Clippings of 1971: A collection of Twenty-eight Volumes*, donated by S. A. Jalal. Vol. 16 April- December 1971 (Liberation War Museum, Bangladesh) P. 83

⁹² Maleka Begum. '*Muktijudde Nari*' p. 95

war. They killed any suspicious traitors around. Once the Pakistan army found their camp at a village named Neanderkhil, the freedom fighters gave grenades to the women and taught them how to detonate those; seventeen Pakistan militias were killed in the grenade attack by women.⁹³ Two fearless women, Bithika Biswas and Shishir Kona, at Swarupkathi (Barishal) threw hand grenades at a Pakistan army gunboat anchored in the Swarupkathi River. Captain Beg, commander of a group of guerillas, decided to attack it. Bithika and Shishir took up the challenge. On 11 July 1971, on a drizzling night, they got off the boat and swam towards the Pakistani gunboat. Hidden under water hyacinths, they lurked closer to the gunboat with hand grenades tied to their waist. There were three launches, preparing dinner. As they awaited a more convenient moment to strike, the downpour turned heavier. So, they decided to not delay, unhooked the grenade rings with their teeth, and detonated the grenades on the gunboat. Right after the grenades exploded, hundreds of machinegun shots ran through the darkness. Risking their lives, the two daring ladies stayed afloat and stuck to the enemy launches before a safe return.

These brave women were never mentioned by any of the prominent figures of the war sector 9. The Deputy Attorney General, advocate Obaidur Rahman, said that the time was not favourable, so their names were not included.⁹⁴

Ignoring women's heroism is not unusual. Women got *Birangana* award easily but were not recognised as *freedom fighters*. Men were honoured, while women were neglected. Taramon Bibi was conferred the Bir Protik (War Hero) after the war. On 15th December 1973, the newspaper Bangladesh Gazette published her name for the first time. But, she was overlooked in Bangladesh due to lack of information on her family for almost three decades. Then, in 1995 Bimal Kanti Dey,

⁹³ Maleka Begum. 'Muktijudde Nari' p. 85

⁹⁴ Ibid, Pp. 96-99

a researcher and journalist, uncovered her role after painstaking research. More bizarre, she was clueless that she had been honoured by the state a long time ago. Nor did she even expect to be honoured for her invaluable contribution. Taramon Bibi started to work as a cook for the freedom fighters when she was sixteen. Impressed with her bravery and smartness, the commander of the team, Habildar Muhib, trained her to clean, load and unload the guns, and secretly to shoot as well. He also trained her to act as a mad woman. She worked as a spy when Pakistan army camps were terrifying spaces for women. She used to go the Pakistani camps, covered in mud, chalk, ink, and even human excrement, to collect detailed information on their position, arms and ammunitions, and their strengths. Sometimes she acted as a mad woman with shabby hair, smiling or crying for long time in front of the Pakistani soldiers. Sometimes, she disguised herself as a crippled lady, she used to swim in the river and search for the Pakistani forces.⁹⁵ Based on her information, the freedom fighters organized the Kodal Kathi operation, and freed it from Pakistani control. She participated in at least three to five frontline fights in different areas.

During the war Neera Lahiry was a medical final year student. She joined the war as a guerrilla at Kaliganj, near Dhaka. She played a versatile role during the war. She not only gave the medical support to the freedom fighters and the helpless people, but she also fought with arms and carried ammunitions and hand grenades. This brave lady sacrificed her life to save a number of wounded freedom fighters. A shelter house where she tended to wounded freedom fighters was set on fire by the Pakistani army. She was so busy moving her wounded comrades to the basement of the house as well as the arms and bombs that she did not notice her saree catching fire. Aflame, she came out with a gun and hand grenade to shoot the Pakistani army who shot her dead.⁹⁶

⁹⁵ Momin Mehdi. *Ma Muktiyoddha, Chetonay Muktiyuddho* in Badrun Nahar Khan. *Muktiyuddhe Narir Obodan*. P.127

⁹⁶ Lahiry. *Muktiyoddha Nipa*. Pp. 88-90

When men were reluctant to allow women to fight in the war, women dressed themselves as men to hide their gender identity, and displayed their strength by holding heavy arms and the like. One such teenage girl was Mitil Banu who joined the war with her family's support. From March to April, 1971 she donned male attires. An Indian journalist from the daily Statesman revealed her identity and she could not hide herself anymore. Consequently, she went to India and received training at the government training centre in Gobra. She returned to Bangladesh after her training and joined Sector 9 under Major Jalil. Freedom fighter Aleya Begum was another brave teenager, aged around 14-15 years in 1971.⁹⁷ Wearing trousers and shirt, she participated in the war like men. She became well-skilled at using rifles, guns, SMG, and SLR. Her wit and courage awed her comrades, freedom fighter Sirajul Islam Siraj, district commander of freedom fighter Sangsad, and freedom fighter Rejaul Karim. After liberation war she was unknown for 27 years. She was not recognised as freedom fighter; her husband, a freedom fighter, was killed on 21st March 1975. She was assigned as a unit commander at the Aalamdanga thana command of the Muktiyoddha Sangsad.

The Pakistani regime targeted not only Bengali women but also the indigenous people of East Pakistan. Indigenous women too participated in the war. Kakan Bibi,⁹⁸ a Khasia women, fought nine times on the frontline. Searching for husband who was posted in the East Pakistan Regiment (EPR), Kakan came to East Pakistan. At Doarbazar Tengratila Camp, the Pakistan army caught her and raped her mercilessly. They released her after a few days and she became revengeful. She contacted freedom fighter groups and she was appointed as a spy by sector commander Lt. Col.

⁹⁷ Supa Sadia. *71-Er Ekattor Nari (Seventy-one Women of 71)*. (Dhaka: Katha Prakash, 2014)

⁹⁸ Kakan Bibi's real name was Kakan Khasia. She belonged to Khasia indigenous community. She became Kakan Bibi after marrying a Muslim. Her home was in the Nartharai Hills in Meghalaya, India. Her father's name was Giso Khasia and her mother's name was Meli Khasia. Her freedom fighter certificate number is 158033, in Mustafiz Shafi & Tauhidur Rahman. *Ekattorer Bijoyini (Winner of Seventy-one)* (Dhaka: Shuddhashar Publication, 2011). P. 49-50

Mir Shawkat. Using different disguises, she used to collect and provide information. She was caught yet again by Pakistan army while spying at Bangla bazar in Doarbazar sub-district. She was tortured for seven days. Hot iron was pressed on various parts of her body. Thought to be dead, she was thrown away. One day later, she regained consciousness and was taken to a freedom fighters' camp. After she had recovered, she learnt to use fire arms. In November, 1971 she turned a frontline combatant for the first time with other freedom fighters at Tengratila. She was shot on her right thigh. After that she participated in combat at 9 different places, sustaining injuries in her leg. Though a courageous combatant in 1971, she was forgotten and unknown for more than two decades.

People living in Dhaka in 1971 encountered grave danger. Yet some people had no option but to stay in Dhaka. From teenagers to the elderly, everyone who supported the war participated in various ways. During the war freedom fighter Linu Haque⁹⁹ was a teenager aged 16, and lived in old Dhaka with her family. Her elder brother was a member of revolutionary students' union. So, she had a family background of involvement in political activism and nationalist movement. She said, "The death of Matiur Rahman Mallik, a nationalist activist, in the 1969 uprising impacted me a lot. Matiur's uncle was our neighbour. So, I knew him. Since the 1969 uprising I had been involved in political activism. In March 1971 I participated in the demi rifle training on the roof top of the DAKSU building at the Dhaka University (DU). On 25th March midnight we hid under the bed when the tank attack happened. Fawzia khala (aunt) was the main organizer who motivated us to do different types of activities. We lived in old Dhaka, near the camp of East Pakistan Regiment, where majority of the neighbourhood – inhabited by Bihari migrants – supported West

⁹⁹ Linu Haque was a teenager freedom fighter, while talking to her I found her excitement, nationalism, and dedication for the freedom war. Her memoir *Girls of Gallantry Azimpur 1971* reveals the freedom war through the eyes of a teenage girl. Linu Haque. *Girls of Gallantry Azimpur 1971*. (Dhaka: Ankur Prakashani 2022)

Pakistan. So, we had to ensure great secrecy. First, we wrote a red letter to the people who used to support the Pakistani regime. We threatened them we would inform the freedom fighters about their support of the regime. We put these letters in the mailbox and the very next day we used to visit their houses to gauge their reaction. The next task was to distribute leaflets. Sector commander Sanu Bhai(brother) used to bring us leaflets to deliver. We delivered those while playing in the neighbourhood and put up posters too. Under Fawzia Khala's direction, we drew a few sketches of the Pakistani military and the freedom fighters to enrich the contents of our posters. Typically, the posters read 'Surrender Pak Army.' Shirin Apa¹⁰⁰(Shirin Akhter) and I used flour to make glue. We used to leave home at dawn and quickly return after putting a few posters on the roadside walls. We had to be very careful to avoid the eyes of the people commuting to the colony mosque for Fajr (the Morning Prayer). One day my downstairs neighbour saw us and asked why we were outside. We replied that we had gone for an early morning walk. However, he soon realised what we had been up to when he saw the posters on the walls. He later came and cautioned us in a tense voice, "Whatever you girls have been doing, please don't do it in the nearby areas. Not only will you two die, all of us will meet the same fate too."¹⁰¹ On 30th January 1972 women guerilla freedom fighters surrendered arms at the Dhaka Stadium in the presence of Bangabandhu, Comrade Mohammad Farhad, and Saifuddin Ahmed Manik on the occasion of formal surrender of arms by freedom fighters.¹⁰²

Our discussion thus far shows that women participated in frontline combat. History of Bangladesh's liberation war is incomplete without acknowledging women's contributions.

¹⁰⁰ Shirin Akhter, General Secretary, Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal. Interviewed on April 18, 2022 in Dhaka.

¹⁰¹ Linu Haque. *Girls of Gallantry Azimpur 1971*. She shared her experience and her memories during an interview on April 17, 2022.

¹⁰² Aftab Ahmad. *Swadhinata Sangramey Bangalee (Liberation Struggle of the Bengalees): An Album of Photographs. (Dhaka: Mrs Momtaj Ahmed, 1995)*, P. 151. The photo shows about 15 ladies standing in the queue on the occasion of formal surrender of arms by freedom fighters.

Although women's writings give us a fair idea of women's heroics, that is hardly enough. In most cases, the books are written by relatively lesser known authors and do not find a place in the mainstream historical narrative. The current government of Bangladesh has been working to sharpen focus on the role of women. But, a lot more research needs to be conducted on women freedom fighters who deserve much more publicity. If we accomplish this dual task, society might be able to shed its patriarchal attitude and form a more balanced view of the 1971 liberation war.

Gendering wartime sexual violence against women in Bangladesh

Specific themes need to be addressed in the context of rapes during the liberation war of Bangladesh. Rape in the course of international or internal armed conflict is considered a war crime – a crime against humanity, and it may constitute an element of genocide. Feminist author Susan Brownmiller illuminates Bangladesh war distinctively, she narrates that the story of Bangladesh was unique in one respect. For the first time in history the rape of women in war, and the complex aftermath of mass assault, received serious international attention.¹⁰³ Brownmiller opines on ‘masculine ideology of rape’ in her pioneering work, that "... rape became not only a male prerogative, but man's basic weapon of force against woman, the principal agent of his will and her fear."¹⁰⁴ A societal order built upon violent patriarchal notions of the supremacy of manhood provides the undertone for crimes committed against women during the liberation struggle of Bangladesh. War, which is traditionally perceived in strong masculine categories, provides a

¹⁰³ Susan Brownmiller, *Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Rape.* (New York : [MysteriousPress.com/Open Road Integrated Media](http://MysteriousPress.com/OpenRoadIntegratedMedia), 2013) P 86

¹⁰⁴ Brownmiller. ‘*Against our will*’ Chap-1. p 33

pertinent context for looking into the complexities of violence against women during the liberation war. Rape as such is not merely a symbol of a violent war. It is to a great extent the domination and subjugation of the female body in an established patriarchal order. Brownmiller also makes a powerful observation that the basic instinct to violate a woman sexually does not necessarily need a crude political motivation. Wartime rapes are impulsive as well as political, "and the effect is indubitably one of intimidation and demoralization for the victim's side."¹⁰⁵ Sexual violence on the female body during the liberation war was no exception to this. Armed men on different sides committed atrocious acts against women with an obsessive desire to humiliate their enemies psychologically and morally. Numerous women were forcibly taken to the military camps where they were subjected to unfathomable horrors. Women were chained as sex slaves for the military men, their heads shaved, and lay around naked – the conditions were horrific in those camps. There were forced impregnations which, as genocide scholars point out, was a well-thought plan to alter the racial composition of the future generations of the Bengali community. The Bangladeshi nationalist portrayal shows the atrocities being solely committed by the 'enemy,' meaning the Pakistani Army; there were numerous cases of rapes and torture of women belonging to the ethnic and religious minorities. The nationalist portrayal of the conflict is based solely upon the heinous crimes committed by the Pakistani Army and its local collaborators which is undisputable. However, independent studies reveal the abuse of women was a wider phenomenon and committed in varied forms by several groups, including those from among the Bengali nationalist fighters. Rubi Zaman¹⁰⁶ eruditely demonstrates the wartime masculinity in her novel, *Invisible Lines*, where the superheroes, our *Muktijoddhas*, trod the same path as the Pakistani army and committed sexual

¹⁰⁵ Ibid. p 37

¹⁰⁶ Ruby Zaman. *Invisible Lines*. (New Delhi: Harper Collins Publishers India a joint venture with The India Today Group, 2011). Pp. 50-222

violence in areas controlled by Pakistan supporting committees. There was no safe territory for women as the war blurred the lines of distinction between one's own people and the 'enemies'. This is precisely because the violence unleashed upon the women was a tool of exerting power and manhood by perpetrators from across the communities. And therefore, women at times remained vulnerable to their own people, their own community. The notions of wartime masculinity, however, prevailed in the so-called peacetime, referring to the period following the liberation of Bangladesh. War, perceived in the most robust masculine notions, bears similar consequences in both victory and defeat. The female body, as an object of male subjugation, becomes the boast of the victorious and a shame for the vanquished. In the case of Bangladesh, the nation emerged victoriously. Still, it felt overwhelmed with a sense of national shame owing to the degree and scale on which women were violated during the nine-month course of the war. This brings to focus the message of how raping a woman is channeled as an inevitable weapon during the war, and a means to subjugate women even after the war has ended. Bangladesh, the nation that faced such horrors to liberate itself, however, failed to realize the suffering their women faced. More than sympathies and concern for the women survivors, the nation portrayed the raped female body as a battlefield which resulted in nothing but a loss of national honour. Therefore, the word '*Birangana*' seems to be strengthening the longstanding notion of female bodies being objects of contempt and vengeance for the male dominated society. While acknowledging the brutalities faced by women during the war, it is essential to go beyond the victimhood ascribed to the women and bring about stories of resistance and bravery on the part of those hundreds and thousands of women who were an integral part of the liberation struggle. It is necessary to delve deep into the subject to situate women and the roles they played throughout those nine months. Despite the extraordinary volume of literature on the crisis of 1971, most of the works have dealt

with women as passive, meek victims of the war. Such attitudes contribute towards attributing a hegemonic character to the liberation struggle. Even more unfortunate is the case of women from the marginalized communities, mainly the ethnic and religious minorities, whose voices have not just been unheard but kept out of the frame of the nation's history.¹⁰⁷

With women, war, the exclusionary vision of ethno-nationalism, and gendered hierarchies, Bengali nationalism has dictated the course of women's history and their share of the liberation struggle. The suffering of the Bengali women as appropriated by the nationalist discourses, however, cannot be accepted as the absolute female experience, precisely because of the blatant obliviousness of the caste, class, ethnicity, and religion dynamics. The thrust at the victimhood of Bengali ladies comes alongside the invisibilities and exclusion of the experiences, struggles, and resistance of different marginalized ladies, specifically the Urdu-speaking ladies who are believed to symbolize a network that became against the concept of liberation. Thus, on one hand wherein Bengali ladies are remembered because they were essential sufferers of a war-torn nation, ladies from the Urdu speaking groups have dwindled into stupor. It is essential to apprehend that the marginal reputes of ladies is not always solely because of their gendered identities. This is wherein intersectionality will become significant, which incorporates the marginalization of ladies primarily based totally on their socio-financial role within side the society, their spiritual affiliations, their racial identity, their ethnicities, their sexualities, and as such. Marginalization is, therefore, resulting from a couple of layers of oppression and intersections of most of the classes of race, religion, caste, class, language, ethnicity, sexuality, etc. These identities region girls from character sections at a more vulnerability than others. Thus, the notions of enforced sisterhood and an over-arching lady revel

¹⁰⁷ Steffi Sarah Deb 'The Liberation War of Bangladesh: Women and the Alternative Narratives of the War' (Journal of International Women's Studies Vol. 22, No. 4 April 2021), p. 83
<https://vc.bridgew.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2429&context=jiws>

in could likely fail girls from the maximum marginalized sections, in this specific case the Urdu-speaking Bihari girls. In the prevailing context, the Urdu-speaking girls, additionally labelled as the 'other' or the 'enemy' female, now no longer simply needed to endure the vengeance of the Bengali men; they have been dehumanized and stripped in their life as rightful residents of an impartial state. This leads one to apprehend that the marginalization does now no longer quit with the bodily violation; however, it keeps on via exclusionary attitudes and guidelines toward them within side the post-liberation period. Saikia in her pioneering work sheds light on the experiences of the Urdu-speaking women. The dichotomy of the victim and the offender has been critically taken up with the aid of using the writer who questions the de-legitimization of the reminiscences of women from the marginalized communities. She highlights how, even in exclusion, the Urdu-speaking ladies are preserved to stand violence and are silenced. The writer shows how in the countryside each creates and sustains specific reminiscences of the liberation war to this day. Therefore, it is crucial to revisit the liberation war and its memories to develop an understanding of the experiences of women from that of the marginalized Urdu-speaking women and opening up spaces for women to be remembered and recognized as equals in the struggle for the liberation of the nation. As argued with the aid of using Das¹⁰⁸, one wishes to investigate what is at stake whilst we talk to the recollections of 1971. The passing reference to the 'Birangana' and the absolute silence over the query of the 'Bihari' women further justify how women, their bodies, and their agency are sacrificed on the altar of nationalist appropriation, their identities reshaped in the course of history. It is a paradox how rape and violence have been represented through literary and visual

¹⁰⁸ Chaity Das, "In the Land of Buried Tongues: Testimonies and Literary Narratives of the War of Liberation of Bangladesh", (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2017) in Deb, *The Liberation War of Bangladesh: Women and the Alternative Narratives of the War*.
Journal of International Women's Studies 22, no. 4 (April 2021), pp. 78-86.
Available at: <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol22/iss4/6>

forms but individual memories of women both from the Bengali-and-Urdu-speaking communities are held with shame and taboo. The horrors of the mass sexual violence continue to be etched within side the collective memory of the nation but the lived experiences of the women and their struggles and them looking for acknowledgment, dignity, and justice have been met with astounding silence.¹⁰⁹

While women played versatile role during the war, however, except three women freedom fighters, Taramon Bibi, Kankon Bibi and Captain Sitara, no other women were honored as freedom fighters for years. After Bangabandhu's death women as well as many male freedom fighters were suppressed and overlooked by the society and the powerful anti-Bangladesh sections of society. Researcher Maleka Begum refers to *Nari Grantha Prabartana* on 16th December, 1990 at Shaheed Miner where some significant questions were asked. Why mothers-sisters-wives, and overall women are represented only as mourning? Why *Muktijuddho* turns up only as a defensive war? If none could be a freedom fighter without handling weapons and crossing the border, why is a wrong concept is developing its roots? Husbands and sons dedicated their lives to the war, but why are women only glorified as mothers and wives rather than focusing on their other roles?¹¹⁰

In 1996, on the occasion of a quarter century of liberation, *Mohila Muktijoddha Sangsad* (*Women's Freedom War Parliament*) was formed, aiming to work for the women freedom fighters and highlight the roles they played. As a result of this development, the new law of including mother's name in application was added.

¹⁰⁹ Deb. *The Liberation War of Bangladesh: Women and the Alternative Narratives of the War*. Pp. 78-86. Available at: <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol22/iss4/6>

¹¹⁰ Maleka Begum. *Muktijuddhe Nari*. P. 14

To research for documents related to women's role in the 1971 war, I visited the Bangla Academy library where I learned that all documents regarding women and the liberation war were seized by International Criminal Tribunal because of War Crime case the investigation. It is deeply disturbing that even after half a century the war victims have not received justice. Criminals are still a cause of fear.

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. Therefore, even after half a century only a small number of women are recognized as Bir Pratik and few hundreds of women as freedom fighters while women were half of the demographic composition in 1971.

No matter what ethnicity or religion women belong to, they are the first victims of war. I argue women are considered as weapons to wreck the innermost strength of a country. The enemy asserts its masculinity through attacks on women; for instance, Bengali women being assaulted by Pakistan Army and pro-Pakistani collaborators during the liberation war. On the contrary, after winning the war, pro-Pakistani Bihari women were raped by the Bengali freedom fighters. Women shape the ethnic identity of a nation through their wombs. Destroying those wombs through rape, producing illegitimate children is a war tactic. Rape is used as a way of destroying or exterminating a national, ethnic, racial, or religious group.

Rape as well as other sexual violence against women is not unusual in the history of warfare for thousands of years. It is not only considered to be an isolated act of brutality but also used as a military and a genocidal weapon. During a genocide, rape is an act of violence that is always committed together with other brutal acts, such as beating, torturing, kidnapping, and murder. Irene

Khan, the seventh secretary-general of Amnesty International, explains: “Custom, culture, and religion have built an image of women as bearing the honor of their communities. Disparaging a woman’s sexuality and destroying her physical integrity have become a means by which to terrorize, demean, and defeat entire communities, as well as to punish intimidate and humiliate women.”¹¹¹

Gayatri Spivak has questioned whether there can be a moment when the marginalised can speak. In her opinion, the silencing of the marginal constitutes the lack of agency. The fundamental issue that power is located in specific sites and is exercised by the architects of power located in specific sites is an important consideration to bear in mind. Like giving voice to the construction of voiceless-ness of subalterns, women’s role too needs to be critically evaluated in the case of Bangladesh because it is not simply a matter of agency of the one who does not and cannot speak. It is also a matter of listening: Do we hear what they cannot say?¹¹²

Many survivors of rape refused to talk about their experiences for fear of being blamed or rejected by their families or communities or in shame of losing honor. After several attempts to speak with *Birangana* Kanon Gomej, her feeble voice broke down, “How many times should I describe these?!” Rape is a heinous way of inflicting harm as the victim suffers both bodily and mental harm. Although boys and men are also victims of different sexual abuses, in most cases, girls and women are the primary targets of rape and sexual violence. During the Second World War ‘comfort stations’ were used to hold women captive to ‘service’ imperial Japanese forces. At these ‘comfort stations,’ women – mostly from Korea and other occupied countries – were brutally gang-raped,

¹¹¹ Women’s Lives and Bodies- Unrecognized Casualties of war,” Amnesty International Press Release, December 8, 2004. Available at www.amnesty.org/library/Index/ENGACT770952004. Used by Springner, Jane. (Toronto: Groundwood Books/ House of Anasi Press) P.72

¹¹² Saikia. *Women, War and the Making of Bangladesh Remembering 1971*, P.127.

beaten up, mutilated, and sometimes murdered. International Criminal Tribunal (ICT) for Rwanda was the first to define rape as a genocidal act in 1998. Rape and sexual exploitation are no less crimes than assassination. They are a crime against humanity. In February 2001, three Bosnian-Serb soldiers at the ICT of former Yugoslavia were found guilty of mass rape and sexual enslavement which were recognised as crimes against humanity. Finally, International Criminal Court (ICC) defined sexual violence as ‘Crime Against Humanity’¹¹³ and ‘War Crimes.’ Definition of crime against humanity provided by Rome Statute of ICC in Article 7 includes torture, rape, sexual slavery, enforced prostitution, forced pregnancy, enforced sterilization, or any other form of sexual violence of comparable gravity.”

¹¹³Crime Against Humanity Background, United nations. Accessed on November 13, 2022. Available on <https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/crimes-against-humanity.shtml>. Also in Springner, Pp. 70-75

Conclusion

This thesis aimed to analyse women's contributions in the making of Bangladesh. I followed chronological divisions – broadly the role of women from 1948 to 1968 and from 1969 to 1971 – to highlight the contribution of women. I explored women's role as combatants and nurses, and in other ancillary activities. From a bird's eye view, there were significant class divisions in the society in terms of women's contribution. In general, most of the women freedom fighters belonged to upper and middle classes; they worked in the camps as nurses and motivators, and elsewhere as organisers and raised funds. Women from the peasant classes played a crucial role in frontal warfare. Peasant women transported weapons and messages, hid fighters from the Pakistan army and their collaborators, provided food to the freedom fighters, nursing care to wounded, and as an omen of the future, a small number of women fought alongside the men. Sonia Amin, a professor at the Dhaka University, said to me – in a personal discussion – that the definition of the suffering changes when humanity evolves. In the patriarchal society everything was not inhuman or beastly. Patriarchal armed warfare has changed a lot of people. I agree with her, and I would like to argue that the liberation war broke social moulds. Women came out of the household space. Through the rehabilitation programmes since independence, women have become a substantial part of the Bangladeshi workforce. In economic terms, they are much more self-reliant. Sexual violence is a part of war policy. Though Bengali women bore the greater brunt of sexual assault during the liberation war, other ethnic and linguistic minorities like the Khasia and Urdu-speaking communities experienced it too. But, sexual abuse was not the only lived reality for women in Bangladesh in 1971. Women fought, not only the occupying Pakistani regime, but also against

patriarchal social norms. My thesis critiques the myopic mainstream Bangladeshi perception and projection of women as primarily victims of horrendous sexual assault in 1971. In investigating the multifarious and crucial roles women played in the war, my thesis writes them back as equals into the history of the making of an independent Bangladesh.

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Khuku Ahmed. Freedom fighter, a nurse. Worked at the Sonamura Melaghar Camp Hospital with her husband, freedom fighter Major (retd), Bir Bikram Dr. Captain Akhtar. Interviewed on April 24, 2022 at 1.21pm at her house in Banani, Dhaka.

Linu Haque. A teenage freedom fighter. She stayed in Dhaka during the war and worked for the freedom war. Interviewed on April 17, 2022 at 3.32pm at her house in Uttora, Dhaka.

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