

Aug-2019

History and/through Oral Narratives: Relocating Women of the 1971 War of Bangladesh in Neelima Ibrahim's A War Heroine, I Speak

Sanjib Kr Biswas

Priyanka Tripathi

Follow this and additional works at: <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws>

 Part of the [Women's Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Biswas, Sanjib Kr and Tripathi, Priyanka (2019). History and/through Oral Narratives: Relocating Women of the 1971 War of Bangladesh in Neelima Ibrahim's A War Heroine, I Speak. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 20(7), 154-164.
Available at: <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol20/iss7/10>

History and/through Oral Narratives: Relocating Women of the 1971 War of Bangladesh in Neelima Ibrahim's *A War Heroine, I Speak*

By Sanjib Kr Biswas¹ & Priyanka Tripathi²

Abstract

In the postmodern era, one of the primary objectives of oral narratives is to tell the untold stories of history. Amidst the allegations that historical representation of war narratives, tend to be gendered and biased, these oral narratives of women offer not only a fresh perspective to the wars like the 1971 war of Bangladesh, the Sri Lankan Civil War (1983 – 2009) and the Kashmir Insurgency (1989 – present), but also become their own version of pain, suffering, prejudice, and plight. In that sense, they become the voice of the voiceless, giving the victims a chance to assert themselves, despite their subaltern position. They also converge as tools to reinvestigate or rather question the representation of war history and the politics of submerging women in traditional documented historiography. In the context of the 1971 war of Bangladesh, Neelima Ibrahim's *Aami Birangana Balchi* (first published in Bengali in 1994, translated in English as *A War Heroine, I Speak* by Fayeza Hasanat in 2017), was the first narrative of its own kind that addressed victimization and survival of the *Biranganas* or literal brave heroines of the 1971 war. Ibrahim, being an active member of the humanitarian group 'Bangladesh Women's Rehabilitation and Welfare Foundation' was a close observer of their struggle and thus, she recorded their narratives and published it. In a theoretical framework, where oral narratives play a seminal role in this sort of representations, this paper will broadly discuss Neelima Ibrahim's narratives of *Biranganas* of the 1971 war of Bangladesh.

Keywords: oral narratives; war narratives; *Biranganas*; 1971 Bangladesh war; gendered violence.

Introduction

"I would love to see the day when a young man or woman of this generation will come to greet me as a brave warrior, the bearer of their national flag, and the protector of their motherland. I would love to see a smile of recognition on their faces. I know it is an impossible dream, because I know that my contribution to the war and my existence as a war heroine is hidden from their knowledge. I know for sure that history has made it impossible for them to know of my existence." --*Rina's Story* in *A War Heroine, I Speak* (2017)

Literary narratives throughout the world are replete with instances wherein poets and novelists have taken their resources from oral narratives in the forms of love song, lore, and

¹ Sanjib Kr Biswas is a Research Scholar in the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, IIT Patna, India. He received State level prizes for composition. He has published research articles with *Asiatic: IJUM Journal of English Language and Literature*, *Language in India* etc. For his PhD dissertation he is tentatively working on the title, "Women and/in the 1971 War of Bangladesh: Representation in Feminist Narratives". He can be reached at his email: sanjib.phs16@iitp.ac.in and ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9351-489X>.

² Dr. Priyanka Tripathi is an Assistant Professor of English, Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, IIT Patna, India. She has published with *Indian Literature* (Sahitya Akademi), *Literature & History* (SAGE), *Asiatic: IJUM Journal of English Language and Literature*, *Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities*, *IUP Journal of English Studies*, *Atlantic Literary Review*, *The Commonwealth Review* etc. She works in the area of Indian Writing in English, Gender and Sexuality Studies and Literary Censorship. She can be reached at her email: priyankatripathi@iitp.ac.in and ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9522-3391>.

memory to compose literary texts (Chamberlain and Thompson, 1998, p. xiv). In the war-afflicted world of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, oral narratives narrate the untold stories of the victims of wars often challenging the otherwise biased historical narratives of a state. Historical narratives, therefore, become an important site of gendered representation and history as a discipline has thoroughly remained a male's domain (Woolf, 1929, pp. 37-38). It has conveniently overlooked women's participation and their victimization in wars (Cook, 2006, p. xxvii). From this perspective, the Liberation War of Bangladesh in 1971 is one of the cruellest wars in world history. Ethnic as well as sectarian violence in the east wing of Pakistan by the Pakistani military caused vandalism of civilization, the death of 300,000 people and rapes of 200,000–400,000 women (Linton, 2010b, p. 194). The history of the Liberation War of Bangladesh is preoccupied with the heroism of *Muktibahini*³, but the narratives of raped women and women fighters are largely ignored in the state-sponsored historiographies of Bangladesh (Hossain, 2012). Even the record of the International Criminal Tribunal, which established in 1993 to seek international justice for the victims, is often mute about these women victims (Linton, 2010a, p. 187). In the post-war period, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman (1920-1975), the then Prime Minister of Bangladesh, honored the raped victims of Bangladesh as *Biranganas*⁴ to acknowledge their contribution in the freedom struggle (Murshed, 2015, p. 120). However, this recognition did not help them while facing social prejudices, hatred, and ignorance from their own countrymen (Mamoon, 2017, p. 15). As an initiative taken by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, *Biranganas* were trained and made fit for jobs depending on their aptitude and qualification on the Bangladesh Women's Rehabilitation Board⁵. Bangladesh went through political turmoil even after the war ended and it reached its worst point in 1975 when Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and his family were assassinated.

However, the sustained and relentless efforts of Neelima Ibrahim, a literary scholar, Professor of Dhaka University and a social worker, to give these women voice has resulted in recording the narratives of rape victims, whom she had visited during their rehabilitation process in 1972. When she met the rape victims and stretched her hands to support and empower them, they shared their tales of suffering and experiences of prejudice with her. Ibrahim recorded narratives of approximately thirty-fourty rape victims, and from those, she selected seven, to compile her book *Aami Birangana Balchi* (first published in Bengali in 1992).

Building its framework upon human subject research and contemporary Human Rights discourse, this research paper attempts to reconstruct the traditional historiography of the 1971 War of Bangladesh from a feminist point of view. In its effort to relocate the position of women in this war, the paper examines various war narratives pertaining to women, with a broad focus on the English translation of Ibrahim's book, *A War Heroine, I Speak* (translated by Fayeza Hasanat and published in 2017).

Oral Narratives as the Tales of Humanity

In the socio-political context of our times, one can declare, "Human Rights campaigns also require that stories—especially of Rights being denied—be told" (Nayar, 2016, p. xi). Life history writing through the recording of interviews (with appropriate interventions of criticism and theory) has emerged as a crucial form of human rights storytelling (Smith, 2011, p. 10).

³ *Muktibahini* refers to the Bangladeshi freedom fighters who collaborated with the Indian Army to liberate their nation from Pakistan.

⁴ *Biranganas* refer to the brave heroines of the war.

⁵ The Bangladesh Women's Rehabilitation Board was set up in Dhaka, Bangladesh in 1972 to aid the rape victims of the war with trainings, education, jobs, and shelter. It also aimed to protect them from social outrage in a society where rape is considered a taboo topic.

Our lives, education, upbringing, and idealism all are contingent upon the narratives around us for “[w]e are born into webs of narrative: micronarratives of familial life and macro narratives of collective identity, codes of established narratives that define our capacities to weave individual life stories” (Whitlock, 2007, p. 11). These narratives are inseparable from history as the former owes its roots to the latter (Bruggemeier, 1986, p. 5).

Jean-Marie Schaeffer defines the tradition of oral history as “[w]ho says what in which channel to whom with what effect?” (qt. Portelli, 1998, p. 25). Oral history, in the form of an interview, can build vital narrative empathy because it permits the democratization of literature. It helps to develop a discourse of human rights for a nation because, “the individual’s memories in human rights texts become a subset of the national narrative with its sub-narratives of atonement, forgiveness, justice, truth, and reconciliation” (Nayar, 2016, p. 128). Moreover, war narratives by civilians are popular forms of oral narratives, “[s]ince the era of air-raids, civilians have their war tales” (Portelli, 1998, p. 27). However, the narratives of war by men and women are different in their content and approach. Men’s stories are preoccupied with heroism of the battlefield and diplomatic missions, whereas women’s narratives are marked by the issues related to “health and hospital” (Portelli, 1998, p. 27). One of the reasons for such a difference is the compartmentalised lifestyles of women during wartime. The recent narratives unearth the facts that women have participated as active fighters in many wars throughout history. Though history has typically bypassed the contributions of women, women have emerged as active soldiers in significant armed conflicts—including World War II, in which Soviet women participated on a large scale (Cook, 2006, p. 543).

Narratives of *Biranganas*

Biranganas or brave heroines, emerged as rebellious women in the popular culture of Bangladesh following the Liberation War of 1971, but their title hardly brought them the honor they deserve. They sacrificed as much as their male counterparts, but unlike the men, their voices have been silenced, and they are marginalized. The post-independent historiography of Bangladesh has scarcely dealt with the real suffering of *Biranganas* (Mookherjee, 2015, p. 14). After the end of the 1971 Liberation War of Bangladesh, many *Biranganas* fled with their Pakistani perpetrators to escape the shame of being unwanted in the country for which they cherished their dream (Ibrahim, 2017, p. 38). Even when the brutality of war ceased in the country, brutality for *Biranganas* continued. A number of families in Bangladesh killed their abducted daughters to rid them of the shame of society, and few of them excommunicated the rape victims (D’Costa, 2013, p. 195). The exact number of *Biranganas*, their role in the historical war, and their plight in post-colonial Bangladesh have remained controversial issues of discussion for almost half a century. It took more than two decades to amass the oral narratives of *Biranganas*, because the socio-political condition of Bangladesh would not accommodate their heroic deeds. Instead, these women were referred to as *khota*⁶ (Mookherjee, 2006, pp. 434 - 35). Neelima Ibrahim’s *Aami Birangana Balchi (A War Heroine, I Speak)* was the beginning of a genre that revolutionised not only the genre of storytelling, but also a feminist revisiting of history. After her publication, other South Asian authors and scholars began to work on the narratives of *Biranganas*. It is estimated that 200–300 narratives have already been recorded (Mamoon, 2017, p. 15).

However, these narratives have faced their own share of criticism. Not only was their authenticity challenged but critics also questioned the role of the academics, historians, interviewers, and editors in the documentation of these narratives. Rigoberta Menchu,

⁶ *Khota* is a Bengali slang word meaning “polluted women”.

Benjamin Wilkomirski, and recently Sarmila Bose have been blamed for fabricating the narratives of victims. Rigoberta Menchu, a memoirist who recorded the killing of her family members along with other Mayan Indians by the Guatemalan army, was charged for fabricating her narratives. Her claim to be an eyewitness of the event was vehemently challenged by establishing that she was living far away in a Mexican school during the genocide (Peskin, 2000, p. 39). In a similar way, the documentation of gendered violence in the Liberation War of Bangladesh by Sarmila Bose in *Dead Reckoning* (2011) is alleged to be inauthentic and unreliable. Fortunately, Bose's claim has been dismissed by most academicians. Nayanika Mookherjee wrote, "to take Bose's word for it would be an unfortunate misreading" (2011). Despite the controversy, Neelima Ibrahim's account of *Biranganas* remains one of the most cited works among those writers dealing with gendered violence of the 1971 war in Bangladesh. Noted academic writings on rape victims of the 1971 war of Bangladesh—including Nayanika Mookherjee's *The Spectral Wound: Sexual Violence, Public Memories, and the Bangladesh War of 1971* (2015), Yasmin Saikia's *Women, War and the Making of Bangladesh: Remembering 1971* (2011), and Sarmila Bose's *Dead Reckoning: Memories of the 1971 Bangladesh War* (2011)—have drawn heavily from Ibrahim's work.

Narratives in *A War Heroine, I Speak*

A War Heroine, I Speak recounts the struggle and survival of seven rape victims of the 1971 war in Bangladesh. Ibrahim's narratives resurrected the significant role of women in the otherwise hibernated tales of the Liberation War of Bangladesh in 1971. She was successful to a certain extent in showcasing women's equal participation and questioning the unequal treatment women received during the war and its aftermath. While men were conferred the honor of heroism, women were nothing more than objects of pity. Commenting on their plight, Ibrahim says that the countrymen would have preferred the dead bodies of the violated women rather than finding them living and breathing (2017, p. 57). However, being a social worker and humanitarian, Neelima believed that *Biranganas* had the right to live with dignity in their free country. She initiated her efforts for the empowerment of the raped women because "[w]omen form an essential half of any society, even in conflict" (Karam, 2001, p. 2).

The narratives in *A War Heroine, I Speak* deal with "not merely with the wrongs done to the women in 1971 but the way they sought to rebuild the lives afterward, sometimes abetted by a few humane ones they came across, but sometimes slighted and insulted by some unfeeling ones" (Ibrahim, 2017, p. ix). Dr. Fayeza Hasanat of University of Central Florida, Orlando, translated the book into English (2017) so that it could attain global exposure. The translated version contains major structural changes; the translator has sub-divided the chapters and titled them, unlike the spontaneous narratives of the Bengali version. The narratives, which are derived from several interviews, adopt fictional names because publicizing the names of the rape victims would have negatively affected the social lives of the *Biranganas*.

The first chapter of the book introduces Tara Nielsen, a *Birangana* who had migrated to Holland after being displaced from her own country, independent Bangladesh. Neelima Ibrahim met her at a dinner party in Copenhagen where she had gone to attend the annual board meeting of The International Alliance of Women (Ibrahim, 2017, p. 3). Within a few minutes of conversing with her, Ibrahim recognized that she was Tara Banerjee, a Hindu girl from Bangladesh. She had met her in the operation theatre in the rehabilitation centre. Tara was kidnapped and raped by her fellow countrymen and then handed over to the Pakistani military for prolonged torture. The cannibalistic nature towards Tara continued in the military camp till December 16, the day of Bangladesh's victory from Pakistani rule. During the 1971 war in Bangladesh, Bangladeshi women were not only victimized by the Pakistani perpetrators but

also kidnapped and raped by the pro-Pakistani Bengali people and the Bengali nationalists (Saikia, 2004, pp. 279 – 81). In the words of Tara:

The first man to brutalize me physically in that hospital was a Bengali. I was too weak to fight back and too shocked to absorb the truth that a Bengali man had violated my honor instead of trying to save me. My head was not strong yet, and my body lay powerless, as I was being dishonored by a bestial Bengali man. (Ibrahim, 2017, p. 11)

After her abduction, Tara escaped from her own nation and migrated to Holland. There she became a nurse and married a doctor to live a dignified life.

Chapa, another Hindu girl in the sixth narrative “Fatema’s Story” also met the same fate, but she was not fortunate enough to escape from the country. Her father was a rebellious figure in the Language Movement⁷ of 1952 in East Pakistan and her elder brother had also joined the freedom struggle. After losing her family in the war, she was raped by hundreds of Pakistani perpetrators. Her suffering continued even after independence when neither her family’s sacrifice nor her suffering was recognised by the nation. Her only identity was that she was a Hindu girl raped by Muslims, and hence ostracised by society (Ibrahim, 2017, p. 121). The portrayal of victims’ plight in the literature by Neelima Ibrahim, Nayanika Mookherjee, Yasmin Saikia, Tahmima Anam, and others indicates that nine months’ physical abuse and psychological torture in the lives of raped victims was followed by their struggle for identity in a free state. Hence, they were left with the options of migration, suicide or ongoing psychological and physical torture.

Migration for the sake of gaining an identity, a vital postcolonial stance, is apparent in Ibrahim’s narratives. If during the war *Biranganas* migrated for the sake of their lives and chastity, then after the war they migrated to Pakistan, India and other countries to restore their identity from the position of defiled women. In her narrative, Ibrahim recounts the experience of thirty rape victims who moved to Pakistan with their perpetrators rather than living in a country because “[a] home was not a place for a woman whose body was used by hundreds of men” (Ibrahim, 2017, p. 41). The second chapter of *A War Heroine, I Speak* titled “Meher Jan Speaks” narrates the heart-wrenching story of a fourteen-year-old girl who was raped for nine months in the military camp. Following her victimization, she migrated to Pakistan with one of her perpetrators only to restore a dignified identity. When Neelima Ibrahim approached this young girl to stay in Bangladesh, she was mature enough to foresee her plight and suffering in her own country. Hence, she decided to migrate to Pakistan after marrying her sixty-year-old rapist rather than being pushed to the corners. Meher told Neelima:

I was young in age, but my experience had already told me that there would be no peace or happiness for me in the new country; no one would stand by me. No one came to save me the day these brutes abducted me from my own house; in fact, people from my village helped these animals to collect us as one of their sex toys. (Ibrahim, 2017, p. 37)

After the end of the war and during the resolution process, women continued to be treated as sex objects because their male counterparts did not allow them to forget the brutality, which

⁷ The Language Movement in 1952 was initiated by the students and youngsters of East Pakistan to protest against the Pakistani Government’s decision to impose Urdu as the only national language of East Pakistan, where most of the people’s mother tongue was Bengali. On 21st February 1952, many student revolutionists of Dhaka University were shot dead by the then Pakistani police. In 1999 UNESCO declared 21st February as the International Mother Language Day to commemorate their sacrifice for their mother tongue.

they experienced during the war. Their experience is similar to women, who had been very courageous fighters and peacemakers during wars in different areas of Africa and Asia, became victimised as objects in war-torn societies by their men (Meintjes, 2011, pp. 4-5). Ibrahim's narratives include Bengali women who were physically and psychologically tortured after they had returned from their war imprisonment. In the seventh narrative of Ibrahim's *A War Heroine, I Speak*, Mina, a *Birangana* was blamed and driven away from her home by her husband who accused her of being violated by Pakistani perpetrators. It is evident that women became soft and vulnerable targets in every palpable conflict in Bangladesh--socio-political, gendered, or ethnic.

A huge number of Biharis⁸ migrated to East Pakistan after the partition of 1947, and they accepted the support of Pakistani perpetrators in the 1971 genocide through religious and ethnic connections (Saikia, 2004, p. 275). The seventh narrative in Ibrahim highlights the survival strategy of Fatema, a victim of the ethnic conflict between the Bengali and Bihari communities during the 1971 war. Fatema was a free-spirited girl in Khulna and was raised by the radical religious group primarily led by Biharis living in East Pakistan. The intensity of violence imposed upon her by the allied groups of pro-Pakistani Bengali, Bihari, and the Pakistani military is narrated in the following lines:

Nasir Ali snatched my little brother from me and thrashed him on the street. I heard Pona crying for help, and then I saw his skull break into pieces. My brother's brain jumped out of his tiny head and fell like a lump of blood on the pavement. Nasir and his team dragged me towards their housing estate... Nasir Ali and his father took turns in raping me and then handed me over to other men of their community. (Ibrahim, 2017, p. 117)

Such references of ethnic conflict between Urdu speaking Biharis and Bengali speaking Bangladeshis became a controversial issue in the successive narratives recorded by academicians such as Yasmin Saikia and Sarmila Bose. Yasmin Saikia and Sarmila Bose documented one kind of counter-narrative by Bihari women in their books *Women, War and the Making of Bangladesh: Remembering 1971* and *Dead Reckoning: Memories of the 1971 Bangladesh War* respectively to show that Bihari women were also victimized by the Bengali nationalists in Bangladesh after the end of 1971 war.

After the end of the 1971 war in Bangladesh, the abducted women in Pak military camps were rescued by the joint force of the Indian army and Bengali nationalists. The victory slogan could not solace the minds of those women who spent deplorable lives and endured cannibalistic torture for nine months in those camps. Their countrymen were not proud of their courage; rather they were ashamed of their being alive. Ibrahim's narratives minutely show the concerns of the countrymen in a free nation regarding their war heroines. On the day of victory, the nation glorified the deeds of male freedom fighters, but it conveniently denied the contribution of the war heroines as co-warriors (Ibrahim, 2017, p. 57). Neelima Ibrahim, in the third narrative of *A War Heroine, I Speak*, discusses the crisis of identity of a *Birangana* named Rina in postcolonial Bangladesh. Rina's story explains that during wartime, a Bengali woman was thought to be dignified if she were treated as a personal attendant to an army officer. Being an educated, pretty, and smart girl in the group, she became the personal sex slave of an officer and submitted herself to his greed, because she knew that it was better to submit to one man's lust than to be abducted by a group of hungry beasts. Still, Rina was attacked publicly with her new identity of a "Bengali whore" even by a group of little Bengali boys, and she knew that

⁸ Biharis refer to the people of an ethnic community that originated from the state of Bihar, India.

her fate was that of Lady Macbeth's. She laments, "all the perfumes of Arabia were not enough to cover my crime" (qt. by Ibrahim, 2017, pp. 60-61). Rina, like Meher Jan, decided to escape to Pakistan to get rid of this shame. When persuaded to stay back, she declared: "I would rather go to Pakistan and spend the rest of my shame-filled life with these monsters. Handling these animals would be easier than confronting my loved ones" (Ibrahim, 2017, p. 64). In the fourth narrative titled "Shefali's Story," *Biranganas* appear to be excommunicated, mute, silent, and marginalized. According to the narrative, their presence in a marriage ceremony was considered inauspicious (Ibrahim, 2017, p. 86). Such representation of valiant women of the 1971 war shows that the nation's independence brought honor and dignity for the male freedom fighters, but also gave opportunity to people who fled like cowards to save themselves. At the same time, it bore no fruit for the *Biranganas*, who sacrificed the most (Ibrahim, 2017, p. 69).

The narratives of the rape victims documented by Neelima Ibrahim not only represent the stories of struggle of *Biranganas* but also explore contemporary social and political movements in Bangladesh. The genocide in Dhaka on 25th March 1971, followed by the imprisonment of thousands of intellectuals and women is an often-discussed topic here. Most of the rape victims were kidnapped by the Pakistani military (associated with pro-Pakistanis) in the darkness of the night (Ibrahim, 2017, p. 78). Other topics discussed in fragmented narratives include the general elections of 1970, Mujib's winning, the Agartala conspiracy case, Mujib's imprisonment, the freedom struggle, independence and Mujib's assassination in 1975. In post-war Bangladesh, *Biranganas* shamefully observed that local perpetrators escaped their fate, claiming themselves as the saviors of the nation by joining local politics (Ibrahim, 2017, p. 84). In the fifth chapter "Mayna's Tale", the narrator also records how the treacherous Bengali people or *Razakars*⁹, hid behind the mask of patriots and crossed their line to shout the slogan *Joy Bangla*¹⁰ (Ibrahim, 2017, p. 101).

Neelima Ibrahim's narratives also focus on the transformation of rape victims into courageous women, social workers, and unacknowledged heroes of the nation. Despite being raped, victimised, discriminated against, displaced, and threatened, these women sustained their courage to bring about change in society. Unlike war narratives, Ibrahim's narratives are not always gloomy. Rather, these narratives occasionally represent glorious sides of humanity during the war and its aftermath. The partition of 1947, which divided India into the two nations of India and Pakistan, took place on account of the religious identity of the majority. But Bangladesh defied the motif of partition and proved that culture and ethnicity can also be major identity markers. When the post-partition society of South Asia was preoccupied with hate politics, the bonding between the Hindus and the Muslims in Ibrahim's narratives offers another lens. In one such reference, a Hindu rape victim Shefa encouraged her son Jogi to remember the generosity of the Indian soldier Joginder, who called her mother after rescuing her from the den of Pakistani perpetrators (Ibrahim, 2017, p. 82). War brought Fatema and Chapa into a relationship of caring sisters, beyond their religious beliefs, and Chapa became another daughter and the replacement of Fatema's dead brother to her mother (Ibrahim, 2017, p. 122). The narratives of the rape victims, such as the narratives of Tara, Mayna, and Fatema mention few kind-hearted Bengali men who strongly supported the rape victims, married them and helped them to build their identity. Neelima Ibrahim herself, Moshfeka Mahmud (the director of the rehabilitation centre), the attending doctors, the nurses, and many other social

⁹ During the Liberation War of Bangladesh, some Bangladeshi people made alliances with the Pakistani military to initiate genocide and rape, popularly known as *Razakars* or pro-Pakistanis.

¹⁰ *Joy Bangla* is a slogan in Bangladesh since the 1971 freedom struggle, popularised by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the first Prime Minister of Independent Bangladesh. It means the 'victory of Bengal.'

workers came together to rehabilitate the rape victims through treatment, abortion, adoption of war babies, education, empowerment, and jobs. *Bangabandhu*¹¹ Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the founding father of the nation, appeared dedicated to addressing the concerns of *Biranganas* and referred to them as “brave mothers” (Ibrahim, 2017, p. 18).

Conclusion

To conclude, oral narratives in Neelima Ibrahim’s *A War Heroine, I Speak* unearth the untold stories of marginalized women of the 1971 war of Bangladesh. With opportunities to voice their suffering, they have restructured the course of traditional historiography where women have had little representation. According to Spivak, if the problem of representation can be side-lined through support and opportunity, the marginalized and the oppressed can speak for themselves (1988, p. 25). Neelima Ibrahim has documented oral narratives into a literary masterpiece through her lively portrayal of the experience of the raped victims who can speak for themselves: “Any life story, whether a written autobiography or an oral testimony, is shaped not only by the reworkings of experience through memory and re-evaluation but also always at least to some extent by art” (Chamberlain and Thompson, 1998, p.1). Ibrahim’s portrayal of the suffering of humanity—and the capacity to rebuild—proves this truth. The dignified voice of Rina, a *Birangana* signifies the courage and spirit they sustain after enduring a series of physical and mental torments when she utters, “I am a woman warrior, and no coward can have me!” (Ibrahim, 2017, p. 71). Along with the stories of suffering, prejudice, and pervasive silence, other vital points of Ibrahim’s narratives are the showcasing of women’s empowerment and Hindu-Muslim unity in a war-torn country. The narratives speak of the dreams of acceptance in the country for which the victims sacrificed their youth, chastity, family, and belongings. Despite the hurdles they continuously face, despite the silence brooding over their lives, a war heroine still dares to say: “I will still keep dreaming that, one day, they will recognize me, not as a victim of the war, but as a brave hero” (Ibrahim, 2017, p. 75).

In spite of being the first authenticated version of victims’ narratives of the 1971 war, Ibrahim’s collection has some shortcomings. The issues which are uncovered in Ibrahim’s narratives are violence against women during the peace process, women’s agency in post-war conflicts, victimization of non-Bengali Bihari women in Bangladesh, and women’s active participation in the armed conflict. In the contemporary global context, women contribute to war and play significant roles in the peace processes in the aftermaths of war. The United Nations recognized such presence of women in peace-making when the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 on “Women, Peace and Security” was passed in 2000 (Nanda, 2018, p. 21). Ibrahim’s narratives ignore certain positive sides of women’s agency in war; the narratives hardly bring any instance of women’s direct involvement in the freedom struggle bearing arms and guns. 1971 was a remarkable year in the history of South Asia due to women’s agency in two major conflicts: the Naxalbari conflict in India and the Liberation War in Bangladesh (Roy, 2019). A few recent narratives, including Tahmima Anam’s novel *A Golden Age* (2007) and Dilruba Z. Ara’s *Blame* (2015) bear many such references where the traditional image of women as merely a victim of war is removed; they are rather active participants in armed conflict. Tareq Masud’s documentary *Muktir Katha* (2009) is a tale of the heroism of women freedom fighters in the 1971 war in a remote village of the Faridpur district of Bangladesh. These films and novels all are based on the real-life narratives of women who were directly associated with the 1971 war but remained swept under the rug of mainstream historiography. Another gap in Ibrahim’s narratives is that they document the

¹¹ Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the founding father of Bangladesh, is revered as *Bangabandhu*, meaning ‘friend of Bengal.’

struggle of Bengali women in the 1971 war in particular and not the struggle of women in general. When the recent studies by Bangladeshi as well as international academicians such as Dilruba Z. Ara, Yasmin Saikia, and Sarmila Bose clearly state that Bihari women were also victimized by the Bengali nationalists through motif of revenge following the end of the 1971 war of Bangladesh, one wonders why Ibrahim's narratives remain silent in this regard.

Nonetheless, Ibrahim's narratives of *Biranganas* or raped victims of the 1971 war have definitely contributed a fresh perspective to the successive studies of gendered violence in the 1971 war. The publication of her book during a time of high sectarian violence and the rise of communalism was not easy; she had to struggle to establish the rights of raped victims in their own country through the portrayal of the subaltern voice of women. In literature, if the knowledge of human rights "is practiced (sic) in just the right amount, and with just the right degree of restraint, [it] can bring about a cultural transformation that will leave liberal democracy secure" (Meister, 2012, p. 94). The establishment of subaltern voices defying the male-dominated national narratives of Bangladesh has resulted in many successful outcomes that strengthened the spirit of the Liberation War and liberal democracy in Bangladesh. The recent trials of the pro-Pakistani *Razakars* living in independent Bangladesh prove to be a victory of the narratives of rape victims, because they play important roles in the trials and the executions of the perpetrators. Her narratives make an important intervention to the aim of Human Rights Discourse, to "exhort passive supporters of the old regime to become active opponents" (Meister, 2012, p. 97). Knowledge of the past from the perspective of the victims, as well as the perpetrators, is required to include the experiences of those who dwell in a post-traumatic society (Gramuglia, 2008, p. 151). Ibrahim is not an outsider; she had been engaged in the rehabilitation process of the rape victims of the 1971 war and its aftermath. Despite the shortcomings, Ibrahim's narratives of rape victims of the 1971 war of Bangladesh in *A War Heroine, I Speak* prove to be vital weapons for instigating transnational justice and raising consciousness in Bangladesh. At the same time, they contribute to academia by emphasizing the critical necessity of feminist narratives to both reveal and validate historical truths regarding genocide and rape.

References

- Bose, S. (2011). *Dead reckoning: Memories of the 1971 Bangladesh war*. Karachi: Oxford University Press.
- Bruggemeier, F. J. (1986). Sound of silence: History, narrative, and life-recollections. *Poetics*, 15, 5-24. doi: 2010.1016_0304-422x (86)90029-x
- Chamberlain, M., & Thompson, P. (2014). *Narrative and genre*. London: Routledge.
- Cook, B. A. (2006). *Women and war: A historical encyclopedia from antiquity to the present*. California: ABC-Clio.
- D'Costa, B. (2013). *Nation building, gender and war crimes in South Asia*. New York: Routledge.
- Gramuglia, P. M. (2009). Unsettling accounts: Neither truth nor reconciliation in confessions of state violence - by Payne, Leigh A. *Bulletin of Latin American Research*, 28(1), 150-151. doi:10.1111/j.1470-9856.2008.0293_17.x
- Hossain, A. (2012, May 28). 1971 Rapes: Bangladesh cannot hide history. Retrieved from <https://www.forbes.com/sites/worldviews/2012/05/21/1971-rapes-bangladesh-cannot-hide-history/#4e351a1e16df>
- Ibrahim, N. (1994). *Aami birangana balchi*. Dhaka: Jagroti Prokashon.
- . (2017). *A war heroine, I speak* (F. Hasanat, Trans.). Dhaka: Bangla Academy.
- Karam, A. (2001). Women in war and peace-building: The roads traversed, the challenges ahead. *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 3(1), 2-25. doi:10.1080/14616740010019820
- Linton, S. (2010a). Bangladesh and the prosecution of international crimes from the 1971 war of independence from Pakistan. *Criminal Law Forum*, 21(2), 187-190. doi:10.1007/s10609-010-9119-8
- . (2010b). Completing the circle: Accountability for the crimes of the 1971 Bangladesh War of Liberation. *Criminal Law Forum*, 21(2), 191-311. doi:10.1007/s10609-010-9121-1
- Mamoon, M. (2017). *Birangana 1971: Saga of the violated women*. Dhaka: Journeyman Books.
- Meintjes, S. (2011). The aftermath: Women in post-war reconstruction. *Agenda*, 16(3), 4-10. doi:10.2307/4066104
- Meister, R. (2012). Human rights and the politics of victimhood. *Ethics & International Affairs*, 16(02), 91-108. doi:10.1111/j.1747-7093.2002.tb00400.x
- Mookherjee, N. (2006). Remembering to forget: public secrecy and memory of sexual violence in the Bangladesh war of 1971. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 12(2), 433-450. doi:10.1111/j.1467-9655.2006.00299.x
- . (2011, June 8). This account of the Bangladesh war should not be seen as unbiased. Retrieved July 14, 2018, from <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2011/jun/08/bangladesh-liberation-war-sarmila-bose>
- . (2015). *The spectral wound: Sexual violence, public memories, and the Bangladesh war of 1971*. London: Duke University Press.
- Murshed, T. M. Women, Islam and the state in Bangladesh: Subordination and resistance. *Swadhinata Trust*. Web. 26 July 2017.
- Nanda, S.M. (2018). Challenges for women's peace activism in South Asia, *Women, Conflict and Peace Processes in South Asia*, Benaras Hindu University, 21-22 November 2018.
- Nayar, P. K. (2016). *Human rights and literature*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Peskin, H. (2000). Memory and media: "Cases" of Rigoberta Menchú and Binjamin Wilkomirski. *Society*, 38(1), 39-46. doi:10.1007/s12115-000-1005-2

- Portelli, A. (1998). Oral history as genre. In *Narrative and Genre* (pp. 23-45). London: Routledge.
- Roy, M. S. (2019). The women of 1971, on either side of the Bengal border. *The Wire*. Retrieved April 02, 2019, from <https://thewire.in/women/1971-bengal-violence-women-naxalbari>.
- Saikia, Y. (2004). Beyond the archive of silence: Narratives of violence of the 1971 Liberation War of Bangladesh. *History Workshop Journal*, 58(1), 275–287. doi:10.1093/hwj/58.1.275
- . (2011). *Women, war, and the making of Bangladesh: Remembering 1971*. London: Duke University Press.
- Smith, S. (2011). Narrating Lives. *Profession*, 2011(1), 5-12. doi:10.1632/prof.2011.2011.1.5
- Spivak, G. C. (1988). *Can the subaltern speak?* London: Macmillan.
- Whitlock, G. (2007). *Soft weapons: Autobiography in transit*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.
- Woolf, V. (1929). *A Room of one's own*. Retrieved July 26, 2017, from seas3.elte.hu/coursematerial/.../Virginia_Woolf_-_A_Room_of_Ones_Own.pdf