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## 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 Biswas<sup>1</sup> and Priyanka Tripathi<sup>2</sup>

### 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 often tends 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, Sri Lankan Civil War (1983 – 2009) and 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 war; gendered violence, Bangladesh, civil war

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## 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 memory to compose literary texts (Chamberlain and Thompson, 1998, p. xiv). In the war-afflicted world of 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 to be 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 rape of 200,000 – 400,000 women (Linton, 2010b, p. 194). History of the Liberation War of Bangladesh is preoccupied with the heroism of *Muktibahini*<sup>3</sup> 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 was set up 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*<sup>4</sup> 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 in the Bangladesh Women’s Rehabilitation Board<sup>5</sup>. 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, it is to the sustained and relentless efforts of Neelima Ibrahim, a literary scholar, Professor of Dhaka University and a social worker, who endeavored to record the narratives of rape victims whom she had visited during the rape victims' rehabilitation process in 1972. When she met the rape victims and stretched her hands to support and empower them, these victims

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<sup>3</sup> *Muktibahini* refers to the Bangladeshi freedom fighters who were collaborated by the Indian Army to liberate their nation from Pakistan.

<sup>4</sup> *Biranganas* refer to the literally brave heroines of the war.

<sup>5</sup> Bangladesh Women’s Rehabilitation Board was set up in Dhaka, Bangladesh in 1972 to aid the rape victims of the war with training, education, job, and shelter. It was also aimed at saving them from social outrage in a society where rape is considered as taboo.

shared their tales of suffering and prejudices to her. Ibrahim approximately recorded narratives of thirty-fourty rape victims, and she sorted seven out of them to compile it as 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 feminist point of view. In its effort to relocate the position of women in this war, this research paper illustrates upon 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 writing in the form of an interview (with appropriate interventions of criticism and theory) emerges to be the most suitable example of proceeding further when human rights and humanity become the subjects of research (Smith, 2011, p. 10). 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 root to the later (Bruggemeier, 1986, p. 5).

Jean-Marie Schaeffer simply 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 give a vital narrative concern because, through this way, the democratization of literature is possible. It can immensely help to reconstruct the Human Rights Discourse of a Nation because, "the individual's memories in HR texts become a subset of the national narrative with its sub-narratives of atonement, forgiveness, justice, truth, and reconciliation" (Nayar, 2016, p. 128). 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 the heroism in the battlefield, and the diplomatic missions whereas women's narratives are marked by the issues related to health and hospital (Portelli, 1998, p. 27). One of the reasons that can be cited for such a difference is the compartmentalised lifestyles of women during wartime. The recent narratives are unearthing the facts that women had also participated as active fighters in many wars in history. Though history politically bypasses such contribution of women, women had emerged to be active soldiers in significant armed conflicts like World War II, in which Soviet women participated in large scale (Cook, 2006, p. 543).

### **Narratives of *Biranganas***

*Biranganas* or brave heroines emerged to be rebellious women in the popular culture of Bangladesh since the Liberation War of 1971, but their title could hardly bring them the honor they deserve. They sacrificed as much as their male counterparts but unlike the men, their voice is 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 on *Biranganas* continued. A number of families in Bangladesh killed their abducted daughters to get rid 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 of years. It took more than two decades to come up with the oral narratives of real *Biranganas* because the socio-political condition of Bangladesh was not favorable enough to accommodate their heroic deeds; they rather referred them as *khota*<sup>6</sup> (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 way of revisiting history. After her publication, few other South Asian authors and scholars have also worked 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 went ahead questioning the role of the academics, historians, interviewers, and editors in the documentation of these narratives. Rigoberta Menchu, Binjamin Wilkomirski, and recently Sarmila Bose have been blamed on occasions more than one for the fabrications of victims' narratives. 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 with 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 unauthentic and unreliable. On the other hand, Bose's claim was dismissed by most of the 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 the works of successive writers dealing with the gendered violence of the 1971 war in Bangladesh. Noted academic writings on rape victims of the 1971 war of Bangladesh like 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) used references from Ibrahim in large number.

### **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 aftermaths. While men were conferred the honor of heroism, women were nothing more than objects of pity and adherence. 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 ones (2017, p. 57). However, being a social worker and humanitarian, Neelima believed that *Biranganas* have the right to live with dignity in their free country. She initiated her effort for the empowerment of the raped women because "[w]omen form an essential half of any society, even in conflict" (Karam, 2001, p. 2).

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<sup>6</sup> *Khota* is a Bengali slang to mean polluted women.

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 try to rebuild the lives afterward, sometimes abetted by a few humane people they come across, but sometimes slighted and insulted by some unfeeling ones” (Ibrahim, 2017, p. ix). Dr. Fayeza Hasanat of University of Central Florida, Orlando, USA translated the book in English and published in 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 basically derived from several interviews, adopt fictional names because going public with these names of the rape victims may negatively affect the social life of *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 Movement<sup>7</sup> 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 the 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 in 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

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<sup>7</sup> The Language Movement in 1952 was initiated by the students and youngsters of East Pakistan to protest against 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 21<sup>st</sup> February 1952, many student revolutionists of Dhaka University were shot dead by the then Pakistani police. In 1999 UNESCO declared 21<sup>st</sup> February as the International Mother Language Day to commemorate their sacrifice for mother tongue.

victims was followed by their struggle for identity in a free state. Hence, they were left with the option of either migration or suicide.

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 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 continue to be treated as sex objects because their male counterparts do not forget the brutality, which they gained from the war. Women, who had been very courageous, fighters, peace-makers during the war in different areas of Africa and Asia, became victimised as first-hand objects in a war-torn society by their men (Meintjes, 2011, pp. 4-5). Ibrahim's narratives bring references of Bengali women, who were bodily 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 home by her husband who accused her body to be violated by the Pakistani perpetrators. It is evident that women became soft and vulnerable targets in every palpable conflict in Bangladesh; be it socio-political conflict, gendered conflict or ethnic conflict.

A huge number of Biharis<sup>8</sup> migrated to East Pakistan after the partition of 1947 and they took the support of Pakistani perpetrators in the 1971 genocide in 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 Bengali and Bihari community 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.

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<sup>8</sup> Biharis refer to the people of ethnic community originated from the state of Bihar, India.

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 reference of ethnic conflict between Urdu speaking Biharis and Bengali speaking Bangladeshis became a controversial issue in the successive narratives brought by academicians such as Yasmin Saikia and Sarmila Bose. Yasmin Saikia and Sarmila Bose documented one kind of counter-narratives of 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 was glorifying the deeds of the 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 tells that during the wartime, a Bengali woman was thought to be dignified if she was treated as a personal attendant to an army officer. She, being an educated, pretty and smart girl in the group, became the personal sex slave of an officer and submitted herself to his greed because she knew that it was better to submit her to one man's lust than to be abducted by a group of hungry beasts. Rina was attacked publicly with her new identity of a "Bengali whore" even by a group of little Bengali boys, and she knew that 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, it also gave the opportunity to the people who fled like cowards to save themselves. At the same time, it bore no fruit to 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 talk about contemporary social and political movements in Bangladesh. The genocide in Dhaka on 25<sup>th</sup> March 1971 followed by 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 the pro-Pakistanis) in the darkness of the night (Ibrahim, 2017, p. 78). 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 – all are discussed in fragmented narratives. In post-war Bangladesh, *Biranganas* shamefully observed that the local perpetrators escaped their fate and claimed



themselves as the saviors of the nation by joining local politics (Ibrahim, 2017, p. 84). In the fifth chapter “Mayna’s Tale”, the narrator shamefully observes how the treacherous Bengali people or *Razakars*<sup>9</sup>, hid behind the mask of patriots and crossed their line to shout the slogan *Joy Bangla*<sup>10</sup> (Ibrahim, 2017, p. 101).

Neelima Ibrahim’s narratives also focus on the transformation of the rape victims into courageous ladies, social workers and unacknowledged heroes of the nation. Despite being raped, victimised, prejudiced, displaced, and threatened, these women held 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 aftermaths. The partition of 1947, which divided two nations 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 is so extreme. In one such reference, a Hindu rape victim Shefa named 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 the 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 workers came together to rehabilitate the rape victims through treatment, abortion, adoption of the war babies, education, empowerment, and job. *Bangabandhu*<sup>11</sup> Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the founder – father of the nation appeared to be dedicated towards the concerns of *Biranganas* and referred 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 sidelined 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 proves it. The dignified voice of Rina, a *Birangana* shows the courage and spirit they still hold after

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<sup>9</sup> During the Liberation War of Bangladesh, a few Bangladeshi people made alliance with Pakistani military to initiate genocide and rape, popularly known as *Razakars* or pro-Pakistanis.

<sup>10</sup> *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.’

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

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, prejudices, and pervasive silence, other vital points of Ibrahim’s narratives are the showcasing of women 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 life, 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 narratives have few 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 process in the aftermaths of the war. The United Nations recognized such presence of women in peace-making and 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). Few recent narratives like 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 missing; they are rather active participants in the armed conflict. Tareq Masud’s documentary *Muktir Katha* (2009) is a tale of heroism of women freedom fighters in the 1971 war in a remote village of 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 the mainstream historiography. Another gap in Ibrahim’s narratives is that her narratives document the 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 in the motif of avenge after the end of the 1971 war of Bangladesh, one wonders why Ibrahim’s narratives remain silent in this regard.

After studying Ibrahim’s representation through the lens of contemporary research, it can be claimed that Ibrahim’s narratives of *Biranganas* or raped victims of the 1971 war have definitely given a fresh perspective in the successive studies in gendered violence in the 1971 war. The publication of her book in a high time of sectarian violence and upraise of communalism was not easy; she had to struggle a lot 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, can bring about a cultural transformation that will leave liberal democracy secure” (Meister, 2012, p. 94). The establishment of subaltern voice defying the male-dominated national narratives of Bangladesh has experienced many successful outcomes that strengthened the spirit of the Liberation War, the liberal democracy of 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 that is 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 for bringing the experience of the dwellers 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 aftermaths. Despite having few 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 drawing transnational justice and bringing consciousness in Bangladesh. At the same time, these narratives give a fresh perspective to academia to realize the necessity of feminist narratives to validate historical truth regarding genocide and rape.

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