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Steffi S. Deb
Jawaharlal Nehru University

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The Liberation War of Bangladesh: Women and the Alternative Narratives of the War

By Steffi Sarah Deb¹

Abstract

The year 1971 symbolizes an episode of a bloodbath in the history of South Asia. Popularly known as the 'muktijuddho', the liberation war of 1971 resulted in the creation of the independent nation of Bangladesh. The history of the liberation war has been extensively documented, and the nation's collective memory is filled with tales of heroism displayed by hundreds of thousands of 'muktijoddhas' (freedom fighters). However, such a masculine, selective memorialization of the war escapes women's memories from across communities in Bangladesh, who were significant partakers in the liberation struggle. The lived experiences of the women, who not only suffered the brutalities of the war but were silenced in the years after the nation emerged victorious, remain obscured from the collective memory of the liberation war. Therefore, this research paper aims to revisit the liberation war to comprehend women's experiences of the war and their post-war lives. The paper engages with the idea that nations preserve specific memories of their traumatic past, thereby silencing others. The paper follows an exploratory method, looking into the complexities of the gendered understandings of the collective memory that the nation has upheld, and the systematic silencing of women's experiences in the post-war decades.

Keywords: Liberation War, Wartime Violence, Women's Experiences

Introduction

Throughout the history of human civilization, wars have devastated societies. However, the worst affected in the societies that are rooted in patriarchal and gendered foundations are women and other gender minorities. The liberation war of Bangladesh is a witness to how wars are essentially gendered and it is largely the womenfolk who were subjected to the inhumaneness of the war. The history of the liberation war of Bangladesh involves genocidal violence carried out by the Pakistani Army, violence unleashed by the collaborators of the Pakistani Army, locally known as the 'razakars' and 'Biharis', vengeful attacks carried out by some zealous Bengali nationalists against non-Bengali population, namely the Urdu-speaking 'Biharis', and also violence against other minorities, predominantly against the Bengali Hindus and the indigenous people of the land. However, traditionally, Bengali nationalism and masculine valor

¹ Steffi Sarah Deb is a Research Scholar, Centre for South Asian Studies, School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, India. She is pursuing PhD and is a Senior Research Fellow at Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, India. She is currently working on her PhD thesis which focuses on collective memory, gender justice, and reconciliation in post-liberation Bangladesh. Her other areas of interest include religious minorities and persecution in South Asia, the politics of communal violence in India. She has presented her work on notable platforms addressing women and gender issues, including the December 2019 Conference organized by the Chair of United Nations Studies in Peace and Justice, Leiden University, The Netherlands. She can be reached at her email: steffideb04@gmail.com

of the 'muktijoddhas' (freedom fighters) have dominated the historiography as well as the collective memorialization of the liberation war. Popular estimates in Bangladesh account for around three million people tortured and murdered during those nine months of liberation struggle, around ten million people displaced, a large segment of which comprised of the Bengali Hindus fleeing into the neighbouring country of India in order to escape the barbarity of their perpetrators. Thus the liberation war remains the site of an unprecedented scale of violence, torture, and terror on the bodies and psyche of millions of people fighting for 'mukti' (liberation) in what was then East Pakistan. There are fewer accounts that narrate the violence inflicted upon the non- Bengali ethnic minorities during the war as well as in the post-liberation years. However, such accounts get overshadowed by the huge volume of nationalist discourses that have taken central hold of the collective memory as well as the official narrative of the liberation war.

The liberation war of Bangladesh has been distinctive, as in the words of noted author Susan Brownmiller in her feminist classic of 1975, "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" (Brownmiller 1975:86). Thus the shared aspect to the wartime brutalities discussed above is a 'gender war' that was unleashed upon women from across the communities during and in the aftermath of the war. The popularly accepted nationalist narratives account for around 200,000 to 400,000 women sexually violated during the nine months of the war (Brownmiller 1975:80). However, the experiences of women, as feminist scholars on the subject of the liberation war have reiterated, cannot be comprehended solely within the framework of nationalism, the glorification of the masculine valor, or the number of the women sexually violated. More importantly, the paradox of remembering women as 'victims' of the war while silencing their experiences into enforced amnesia, makes an interesting case for understanding how gendered representations of war and wartime memories have influenced the historiography of the nation. Particularly in the context of post-conflict societies, where individual memories are overshadowed by collective and popular memories, such enforced amnesia results in a homogenous, glorified representation of the past.

In the post-liberation period, the first Prime Minister of Bangladesh Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman took the initiative to deal with the gender-based crimes perpetrated during the liberation struggle. He made a remarkable resolution to honor the women who were subjected to heinous crimes including sexual violence during the war. He declared them as 'birangona', the Bengali word for a war heroine. The Sheikh Mujib led government initiated the campaign to get the survivors married off and in other cases unite them with their husbands and families. As several scholars have already accounted for, Bangladesh even though founded on secular ideals and the spirit of equality, was still a largely patriarchal society where notions of women and the female body being an object of subjugation, in war by the enemy, and at peace by their fellow countrymen prevailed. Thus the idea of bringing women to the forefront and reunite them with their families and communities remained an unfulfilled mission.

Women having faced unspeakable torture during their days of captivity were subjected to misery even after the nation gained its freedom. This was the case for numerous women wherein their husbands and families disowned them. Again, certain segments of the society could not accept the fact that other men had forcefully taken their wives. There have been cases reported of a number of suicide deaths in the months following the war, in most cases, due to shame and ostracization by their own families and communities. The women who gave birth were conscious that neither they nor their new born were to be accepted with dignity in the society or by their

families. Women from the under privileged sections had the worse awaiting. With the help of a few international media outlets covering the story of war and the rape of women, sympathies and solidarity came pouring in from feminist organizations in the West. The most notable among them was the International Planned Parenthood Federation which came to the aid of the female survivors of wartime sexual violence in Bangladesh. The organization based in Calcutta, run by Mother Teresa took the initiative for the adoption of war babies. The Bangladesh Central Organization for Women's Rehabilitation also set up medical facilities to deal with unwanted pregnancies. However, women who could find access to these were but few in numbers. Therefore, the initiatives taken by the humanitarian and feminist organizations could not prove to be meaningful beyond a certain point. They put in their best efforts to help the women reorganize and rebuild their lives. However, the trauma that the women were made to endure during the nine brutal months of the war, and the humiliation and rejection they were subjected to in the post-war period were far from being healed.

Relevant Literature and the Conceptual Framework

There have been multiple theories about the causes and consequences of war. While traditional knowledge of international politics and war revolves around the great powers, intrastate wars are the focus of the critical and new age theorists. As Booth (2007) states, critical theorists deriving from the Marxist perspective challenge the traditional understandings of war with the purpose to free humankind of it. Human security theorists, on the other hand, call for a broader understanding of threats other than actual warfare. However, these new theories seem to be more inclusive and critical in their approach a vast majority of the work neglects the critical category of gender. Thus war goes back long before the theorists comprehended it. This is precisely what Enloe (2010) talks about as 'gender histories' of wars. Wars are as much in the private sphere as they are fought on the masculinized battlefronts. Also, what is projected as the post-war scenario constitutes war and is in turn constituted by it. Some important questions need to be addressed. In the power structure of international politics and phenomena like wars and conflicts, where are women situated? How do gendered hierarchies play out among states, international organization, and political groups? Therefore, a gender analysis presents the unique idea of what constitutes war and analyses how the dynamics of masculinity and femininity shape its course (Tickner 2001). Goldstein (2001) states how militarized masculinities and femininities provoke individual violence and serve as a critical factor for a possible war. A feminist understanding of the individual theorization demonstrates that it is a reciprocal process where women and other marginalized people are not just mere objects of a violent war. Rather they are active subjects and agents of international politics, especially war.

While the nature of power relations varies, most of the societies situate women and the gender minorities in unequal positions as compared to men. While power relations are influenced by categories other than gender, which produces multiple masculinities and femininities, much of the violence perpetrated by men is by and large motivated by notions of toxic masculinity. Feminists throughout have also argued that while maleness is a biological aspect, masculinity or the varied forms of masculinities are a symbolic representation of the prescribed gender status that has to be affirmed by men. Thus studying and addressing war and its gendered dynamics also requires an understanding of violence and the continuities of how they occur. Individuals experience the same phenomena during a war which is mostly physical and mental injuries, sexual violence, death, loss of livelihood and economic disaster, displacement, disappearances,

and as such. However, what makes it different is the way they experience these phenomenon, not just during the war but also long after the war has ended.

There is a significant body of literature that categorically deals with gender-based violence in the context of war, where war is considered to be a masculine domination over women. Notable works by Henry (2016), Pankhurst (2010), and Stern (2006) engage with theorizing organized wartime sexual violence and bringing about the nuances of the differences, causes, and implications that remain so complex and contested. El Bushra and Lopez (1993) further the understanding that conflict increases women's vulnerability while simultaneously also discussing the social, cultural, and individual factors that lead men to rape. Their work also signifies the idea of female identity and gender roles varying across cultures that are greatly affected by conflict. Gottschall (2004) advances the understanding of sexual violence in armed conflict by proposing four main theories. Seifert (1993) by analyzing wartime rape brings forth the argument that rather than being understood as an aggressive manifestation of sexuality, rapes should be considered as a sexual manifestation of male aggression. This provides a critical link to know how women's bodies are seen as battlegrounds, where violating their bodies symbolize the destruction of the enemy's cultural identity. Walker (2009) proposes the concept of gender normative violence to signify the systematic coercion and silencing of women. This is upheld and justified through social, moral, cultural, religious, economic, and political institutions and norms. This generates the idea that such gendered practices initiate and aggravate violence against women during a violent conflict. However, it is essential to understand the violent sexual manifestation that occurs during a war which might not necessarily be an amplification of the prevailing gender normative violence.

While there is plenty of literature dealing with gender and women in particular instances of war zones and conflict-ridden societies, there is a lack of understanding concerning a broader theoretical framework which could address the concerns of gender identities, gender-based violence, in particular sexual violence, and the inequalities they generate and sustain. That men and women are not just differently embodied but hold different meanings to their communities and are targeted differently, leading to other social, cultural, and livelihood impacts need to be thoroughly studied.

A significant strand in analysing the subject of gender is a serious consideration of the other influential social categories- be it race, class, language, ethnicity, nationality, or sexuality. In the specific context of this study, identity, primarily ethnolinguistic forms the core of these power relations during and in the aftermath of the liberation war. A very fundamental but significant understanding of identity is captured in Castells (2004), which considers identity as people's source of meaning and experience. These meanings go on to organize a symbolic manifestation in the form of identities shared by social actors. It is essential to understand how these identities are shaped and reshaped by time and context. Yuval-Davis (1997) and Cockburn (1998) analyze how gender and national identities are constructed with a line dividing 'us' and 'them' and also how gender is linked to the construction of national identities. While nation, nationalism, and national identities might have different characteristics across societies, they essentially share similar understandings of gender identity. This presents the idea of women being symbolic bearers of those collective national identities. There are authors who challenge the idea of collectivizing wartime rapes entirely through either gender or national or ethnic identity, as it subordinates individuals to a collective. These works suggest that universalizing narratives of sexual violence only help sustain the prejudiced nationalist rhetoric. There is ample literature on numerous cases of identity wars. However, it would be more meaningful to engage

with a broader context of how gender and identity be it ethnic, sectarian, religious, caste, class or as such interact during and in the aftermath of a war.

Gendering wartime sexual violence against women in Bangladesh

Specific themes need to be addressed in the context of rapes in the liberation war of Bangladesh. Author Susan Brownmiller in her pioneering work writes, "this accomplished, 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" (Brownmiller 1975:14). The societal order having been 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 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 (1975) 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" (Brownmiller 1975:37). Sexual violence on the female body during the liberation war is no exception to this. Armed men on different sides committed atrocious acts against women with an obsessive desire to psychologically and morally humiliate their enemies. Numerous women were forcibly taken to the military camps where they were subjected to horrors which are unfathomable. Women were chained as sex slaves for the military men, their heads shaved, and bodies lying naked were how horrific the conditions were in those camps. There were forced impregnations which as genocide scholars point out was a well thought out plan to alter the racial composition of the future generations of the Bengali community. However, other than the Bangladeshi nationalist portrayal of 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 remember the abuse of women in varied forms by several groups, including those from among the Bengali nationalist fighters. There was no safe territory for the 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 overpowered with a sense of national shame owing to the degree and scale with 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 'birangona' 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.

Women, war, and the exclusionary vision of ethno-nationalism

Along with gendered hierarchies, Bengali nationalism has dictated the course of the history of women 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 on the victimhood of Bengali women comes along with the invisibilization and exclusion of the experiences, struggles, and resistance of other marginalized women, in particular the Urdu speaking women who are believed to represent a community that was opposed to the idea of liberation. Thus on one hand where Bengali women are remembered as the quintessential victims of a war-torn nation, women from the Urdu speaking communities have faded into oblivion. It is critical to understand that the marginal status of women is not exclusively due to their gendered identities. This is where intersectionality becomes significant, which includes the marginalization of women based on their socio-economic position in the society, their religious affiliations, their racial identity, their ethnicities their sexualities, and as such. Marginalization is, therefore, on account of multiple layers of oppression and intersections among the categories of race, religion, caste, class, language, ethnicity, sexuality, etc. These identities place women from individual sections at a greater vulnerability than others. Thus the notions of enforced sisterhood and an over-arching female experience would possibly fail women from the most marginalized sections, in this particular case the Urdu-speaking Bihari women.

In the present context, the Urdu speaking women also labelled as the 'other', or the 'enemy' woman not just had to bear the vengeance of the Bengali men but were dehumanized and stripped of their existence as rightful citizens of an independent state. This leads one to understand that the marginalization does not end with the physical violation but continues through exclusionary attitudes and policies towards them in the post-liberation period. Saikia (2011) sheds light on the experiences of the Urdu speaking women. The dichotomy of the victim and the perpetrator has been critically taken up by the author who questions the de-legitimization of the memories of women from the marginalized communities. She highlights how, even in exclusion, the Urdu speaking women continue to face violence and are silenced. The author deals with how the nation-state both creates and sustains exclusive memories of the liberation struggle

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 by Das (2017), one needs to analyze what is at stake when we refer to the memories of 1971. The passing reference to the 'Birangona' and the absolute silence over the question of the 'Bihari' women further justify how women, their bodies, and their agency are sacrificed at 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 forms but individual memories of women both from the Bengali and the Urdu speaking communities are held with shame and taboo. The horrors of the mass sexual violence remains etched in the collective memory of the nation but the lived experiences of the women and their struggles and them seeking acknowledgment, dignity, and justice have been met with astounding silence.

Conclusion

In the context of Bangladesh, the dominant narratives memorialize various roles played by both men and women. The stark contrast in remembering the experiences and functions of the actors based on their gender makes for an interesting case. On the one hand, where narratives account for the glorious roles played by the muktijoddhas, on the other they memorialize the women solely in their aggrieved state, devastated by the war and mourning the loss of 'honour'. Robust masculine categories delineate even their active participation in the war.

Women in their silence have created new lives for themselves. Their lives are a testimony to how both the mundane and the extraordinary remain integral in the post-liberation period. Women were stripped of their domesticity and forced into the violence of the war. They not only suffered a physical loss but also were deprived of their familiar space, the home and the family. In the essential sense, their lives were defined by the mundane domestic world. Therefore, what the war did was alter the 'familiar' forever by damaging their families, homes, relationships, and dignity that the women experienced within the confines of the home. Thus when women recollect the past, their narrative is centred on the familiar space of the domestic and its loss. Nationalist accounts of the war have systematically silenced the loss of this domesticity and ordinariness of their lives by glorious and extraordinary tales of the war. While women, especially those in the rural areas remained oblivious to the political and the diplomatic concerns regarding another partition (the first one in 1947) held little or no meaning to them, their lives were affected by the fateful events that the war unleashed as the war advanced nationalist passions had reached the hinterland. Women suddenly found themselves in the midst of a war overpowering their domestic space. Their lives were no longer individual and private but seen as a part of the broader nationalism. War had permanently changed the traditional structure and continuity of the lives of ordinary women.

The historiography of the liberation war, the archival records, the public monuments celebrating the sacrifices and the war literature have primarily generalized women's experiences. Therefore, it becomes pertinent to reclaim those. Recollecting the past is not merely about reflecting the past stories. It is a complex process of situating those stories in the cultural, social, religious, and political realities of those times. Women found themselves suddenly thrust into the public domain with the label of 'war-ravaged women'. This associated the idea of victimhood

with women, simultaneously erasing their ordinary and familiar lives. The everyday struggle of women in the pre-war days would therefore be deemed unimportant and hence unworthy of being collectively remembered. Thus the grand narratives of the war despite their focus on the past fail to capture the memories that women would want to remember. The ordinary memories of the ordinary women escaped the collective memory of the nation.

The liberation war history is essentially a narrative of the brave men engaged in an armed, violent battle. Thus, the selective memorialization of specific memories pushes the other memories; in this case, that of the experiences of women into amnesia. Women previously experienced the loss of power and agency in a patriarchal society. War translated that to a further loss of memory and subsequently enforced amnesia.

The complex ways in which women comprehend the memories of the liberation war, establishes the need to move beyond the dominant way of remembering women in the historiography and popular memories. This necessitates questioning the nationalist narrative of ascribing nothing but 'victimhood' to the women survivors of the war. One must also identify the oppressive legacies of the social, cultural, religious, and political institutions in subjugating women, thereby denying them agency and voice of their own. The gendered hierarchies and socio-cultural prejudices have made the women survivors invisible in the entire process of collective memorialization. Beginning with intense stories of sexual violence to the loss of loved ones, women, their lived experiences, and individual memories have been reduced to mere footnotes in the grand history of the liberation war.

To refute the silence enforced by the gendered memorialization of the liberation war, it is imperative to engage with the individual, personal memories of the survivors. Therefore, revisiting the past through the personal narratives of the women offers new ways of interpreting the memorialization of the liberation war in South Asia. With increasing feminist scholarship on war and peace processes, the historiography of the liberation war has also witnessed new perspectives, of individual female experiences from the wartime being documented. The feminist narratives, written in the context of the liberation war emphasize upon the particular role and agency of women in the socio-political realities of that period. This enables women to narrate their silenced personal histories. These feminist narratives challenge the existing order of a conservative Bengali society, one that is uncomfortable with women voicing out their experiences. Therefore, an articulate narration of women's memories could truly liberate the collective memory from confining women's lives to the image of the 'raped victim', working towards nurturing an ethical, human understanding of women's experiences and memories of the liberation war.

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