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On Being Biranganas: Passivity, Agency, and Wartime Rapes in Shaukat Osman’s Nekre Aranya

By Madhurima Sen

Abstract

The 1971 War of Bangladesh witnessed one of the worst incidents of gender-based violence in history in which women’s bodies became the site for asserting victory or dominance. The newly formed nation focused on the image of the violated women and was united in its thirst for revenge against Pakistani perpetrators. The nation bequeathed the apparently reverential title of birangana (brave women) to the rape survivors in recognition of their “sacrifice.” However, even though the image of the birangana circulated in the public sphere in various forms, the narrative of the women themselves got suppressed under national legend-building. This article studies Nekre Aranya, a novel written in Bengali by Shaukat Osman in 1972 in the immediate aftermath of the war. I argue that Nekre Aranya, although it depicts the horrors of wartime rape camps, does so from a distinctly male perspective on sexual violence, where nationalist emotions determine the trajectory of the narrative. This article examines the often simplistic binaries created by early war novels written by male writers such as Osman. It argues that since Nekre Aranya was written at a time when the nation was rebuilding itself after wartime devastation, the figure of the violated woman in this novel serves as an image that evokes deep nationalistic feelings. This article studies the intriguing conclusion of the novel, in which many women commit suicide within the rape camp and analyzes the reason behind the decision to eliminate violated women from the novel’s plot.

Keywords: Birangana, Rape, Violence, War, Bangladesh, Nekre Aranya

Introduction

Images of “good” South Asian women in mainstream cultural discourse are more often than not associated with passivity and frailty. Time and again, women are relegated to the position of victims, blameless and innocent. Their positionality of victimhood serves as a contrast to martial ideals of masculinity. It is fascinating how these societal ideas of masculinity and femininity take the shape of metaphors for the nation. Literature is no exception to this larger cultural phenomenon, and one often finds visible and powerful conflations of gender roles with different aspects of nationhood and nationalism. Thus, it is not surprising that one of the prime concerns of South Asian nationalist androcentric literature turns out to be the reputation and position of women in the community. The cultural juxtaposition of women’s lack of agency and the masculine sphere of action becomes even more intriguing in the framing of sexual violence in such fiction. Even when the author arguably has nothing but the victims’ best interests in mind, one often observes how preconceived notions of gender ideals mar the...
final literary output. This article studies one such literary representation of gender notions and sexual violence through the analysis of Shaukat Osman’s Bengali novel Nekre Aranya.

Nekre Aranya (translated as The Forest of Wolves) was written by Osman in 1972 in the immediate aftermath of the 1971 Bangladesh war. The official figure of raped women in the war was around 200,000, making it one of the most heinous instances of what has been termed “genocidal rape” (Russell-Brown, 2003) in recent history. Along with the civil war which spiralled out of the long-existing disharmony between the two wings of Pakistan and the international war between the two “arch-enemies,” India and Pakistan, there was another equally vicious war that was being waged in the Bengal of 1971—a gender war against vulnerable women of all communities (Saikia, 2011, p. 3).

Rape as a weapon of war has existed since time immemorial, with women’s bodies serving as a convenient terrain to act out enmities and conflicts. War has always been an arena of gendered violence, and the relationship between women and the army has always been fraught with complexities, considering that women have long been considered as maal-enganimat, that is, justifiable spoils of war. However, over the last century, with the increased technological and organisational sophistication of armies, sexual abuse as part of military programs has seen an escalation in magnitude. The actions of the Japanese army in occupied areas of South-East Asia, the events of Bosnia, and Sudan’s Darfur region are all testimony to the systematic orchestration of mass sexual violence in the last century. The Bangladesh War of 1971 is one such instance in which mass rapes went beyond the subjection of women to the sexual gratification of the army. With girls of eight being raped along with grandmothers of seventy-five (Wadud, 2022), the war witnessed rape being used as a military strategy to destroy the morale of a society through the spectacle of sexual humiliation. Here, rape served not merely as a subsidiary component of a larger war, but as an intrinsic part of military offense.

The post-war lives of the rape survivors have been equally intriguing. On December 23, 1971, A.H.M. Kamruzzaman, the first Home Minister of independent Bangladesh, through a declaration in Purbodesh, conferred the title “birangana” (war heroines) on the women sexually violated during the war (as cited in Guhathakurta, 2016, p. xxx). One is also reminded of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman’s repeated references to the abuse of his “200,000 sisters” (2021) to bring people together for nation-building. The title birangana was meant to honour the women for their “sacrifice,” albeit a passive one, for the nation. However, considering the enormous social stigma associated with sexual violation in South Asia, over the years, the term birangana turned out to have ambiguous connotations and became associated with social vulnerability.

This article examines the language used in Nekre Aranya to represent the violation of women, arguing that the novel reveals more about the position of sexually violated women in the cultural milieu of Bangladesh than the author might have intended to disclose. It argues that Nekre Aranya offers a recognizably patriarchal perspective on sexual violence, where nationalist emotions determine the trajectory of the narrative. Studying the novel with other post-war cultural productions by men, this article argues that certain tropes and images run through them and contribute to the creation of often simplistic binaries and the consolidation of national collective narratives in which women are allocated a position only on the margins.

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2 All translations of excerpts from Nekre Aranya are mine.
3 For the controversies over the figures of casualties and rapes, see Beringmeier (2018).
4 Russell-Brown defines it thus: “It is specifically rape under orders. This is not rape out of control. It is rape under control. It is also rape unto death, rape as a massacre, rape to kill and rape to make the victims wish they were dead. It is rape as an instrument of forced exile, rape to make you leave your home and never want to go back. It is rape to be seen, heard, watched, and told to others; rape as spectacle. It is rape to drive a wedge through a community, to shatter a society, to destroy a people. It is rape as genocide” (2003, p. 350).

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Passive Sacrifice and Circulating Images of Biranganas

The notion of “passive sacrifice” becomes crucial for understanding the cultural representations of sexually violated women. Depictions of sexual violation and violated women abound in post-liberation Bangladeshi media. From popular commercial war films like Raktakta Bangla (1972) to frequently resurrected plays such as Syed Shamsul Haq’s Payer Awaj Pawa Jae (1976), translated as At the Sound of Marching Feet (2017), the figure of the raped woman has dominated the Bangladeshi cultural imagination since the time of the war. Indeed, as Nayanika Mookherjee (2015) observes, “It might seem extraordinary that a violent event like rape has been portrayed so extensively in visual and literary representations” (p. 226). Even more surprising is how many times rape is shown in the media when you think about how shameful and embarrassing it is to be raped in South Asia.

Traditional representation across the media has predominantly been from the male point of view, and women have largely been looked upon as passive victims who unfortunately came under the wheel of history. It is not surprising considering that the majority of cultural producers in the immediate years after the war were middle-class, urban men who formed the buddhijibi (intellectual) class. Thus, in keeping with Miriam Cooke’s (1996) observation that “more than most human activities, war has been considered the literary purview of those few who have experienced combat” (p. 3), Bangladeshi war narratives have, to a large extent, been dominated by masculine voices and experiences of battle and return. Women have, of course, found their place in these representations, but they have been almost exclusively characterised by their passiveness as casualties, civilian bystanders, or victims, or in relation to other men—as soldiers’ mothers, sisters, and wives. This is in sharp contrast to the photographic evidence one can find of the active participation of women in the war efforts, as seen in Figs. 1.1 and 1.2.

Figure 1.1. Training in Azimpur field, before Liberation. Dhaka, Bangladesh. 1971.

Although the “woman question” has been central to nation-building, women’s voices have remained marginal to the dominant discourse, and women’s agency in determining their own future has been underrepresented. In a complex post-war socio-political scenario in Bangladesh where the wartime collaborators were not immediately prosecuted, the cultural representations of the figure of the birangana kept alive the need to seek justice. However, despite the abundance of cultural representations, the passivity and lack of agency of the biranganas in the majority of these depictions opens up questions about whether it is possible at all to have a feminist narrative while working within a nationalist paradigm that is essentially androcentric.

Animal Imagery, Euphemism, and Women’s Lack of Agency

Nekre Aranya was written at a time when the nation was rebuilding itself after wartime devastations, at the historical juncture of hard-won independence after decades of resistance—the Language Movement of 1952, the Autonomy Movement in the years preceding 1971, and a devastating military conflict. The post-war transition into independent Bangladesh was not straightforward and untroubled. The new nation faced enormous challenges, including rehabilitation of the displaced, rebuilding of agriculture and trade, and reconstruction of infrastructure. In a difficult scenario like this, the figure of the violated woman widely circulated in popular media serves as an image that evokes deep nationalistic feelings, and Nekre Aranya is no exception.

The entire action of Osman’s Nekre Aranya takes place in a horrifying setting—in a warehouse that has been taken over by the Pakistani army and transformed into a detention camp for Bengali women. Osman’s literary dexterity results in the creation of a petrifying atmosphere with evocative descriptions of hundreds of women leading an utterly dehumanised life, disallowed from wearing clothes and subject to sexual violence at the hands of the army. As is evident from the title itself, the novel uses powerful instances of animal imagery. The unusually heavy concentration of animal images is used to refer to the victims as well as perpetrators of crime. This extensive use of animal symbolism reveals the hierarchy between the army and the incarcerated women and reveals the lopsided balance of power.
The title itself draws readers’ attention to the significant role that the image of “wolves” plays in the structure and plot of the novel. The wolves here are the Pakistani soldiers who have turned Bengal into an inhospitable, uninhabitable jungle, the choice of the animal highlighting the predatory nature of army actions. This is the central metaphor that runs through the novel, emphasizing the violence that the army unleashed in East Pakistan. The choice of a predatory animal to depict Pakistani soldiers is in keeping with contemporary trends in representation. For instance, one can find similar language in Shahriar Kabir’s short story “Jesus 1971” (1973), where Pakistani soldiers are referred to as “demons,” “hyenas,” “brutes,” and “scoundrels” in contrast to Bengali guerrillas represented as “angels” (pp. 74-75). Similar images of predatory violence can be seen in Haq’s *At the Sound of Marching Feet* (2017), where the army is equated to deadly snakes: “The Army will come at them like hissing snakes with rage-inflated hood” (p. 30).

Readers are introduced to the incarcerated women lying curled like “dogs in wintry nights” in rows (Osman, 2013, p. 18). In another scene, soldiers enter the room where women are imprisoned to select the day’s tributes to senior officers: “Many of them, as usual, are sitting with their heads pressed into their knees. Perhaps they have sensed the arrival of the hunters” (p. 49). These pictures are similar to the sad pictures of “disgraced” women who have been raped in other modern media. The powerlessness and lack of agency of women is highlighted through the imagery of strays seeking to protect themselves from the wrath of winter. The juxtaposition of the dogs and the wolves serves the function of reinforcing the power hierarchy between the soldiers and the women. Similarly, the image of the hunter and its prey echoes, supports, and reinforces the other image, and, together, they contribute to the notion of the helplessness of women in the face of overpowering evil.

The atmosphere in the novel is one of impotent despair: “Rest, sleep—these things are absurd in this world. Here to have existence is a big deal. How hopes and desires get pounded into and take the shape of mincemeat here, even God almighty, the source of everything, wouldn’t be able to tell” (Osman, 2013, p. 18). Symbolic euphemisms, similar to the popular public discourse pivoted on shame, are used not only by the narrator but also by the female characters in the novel to talk about sexual violation, thereby reinforcing the gendered expectations of chastity and purity. Sakhina, one of the captured women, addresses her lover in an apostrophe: “No, I can’t go to you anymore, Azad […], I had intended to hand myself over to you like a flower that hasn’t been smelt… But a drove of pigs ruined the garden of roses” (Osman, 2013, p. 27). The abundance of euphemisms for rape is truly fascinating in a novel whose prime focus is on mass sexual violence used as a military tool. Such euphemisms for rape abound in Haq’s *At the Sound of Marching Feet* (2017) as well:

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If God is so merciful and omnipotent,
that the mere calling of his name
calls down upon us His mercy and His protection
from all evil,
then just you tell me, will
you, where was He?
Where was He last night when that snake bit me? (p. 45)
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In the above examples, one finds a continuation of the predominant animal imagery, the army being compared to a destructive “drove of pigs” and a venomous “snake.” It is interesting that in both cases, women are relegated to a passive status, as “a garden of roses” being defiled or

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5For more on this, see Mookherjee (2015), who studies popular photographic representations of *biranganas* with their faces covered and heads hung in shame.
as victims of snake bites. Of further interest is the fact that these lines are spoken by women themselves, thereby reflecting how they have internalised institutional sexism and patriarchy. It appears that the widespread culture of victim-blaming has been so deeply assimilated into everyday life that women themselves perpetuate patriarchal notions of shame and guilt and view themselves as somehow complicit in their own violation.

Women, Nation and Passivity

The narrative of Nekre Aranya not only reinforces the traditional discourse of the dynamic male hero and the passive female victim, but also sustains the symbolic conflation of women and the nation. The only thing that brings hope to the imprisoned women is smuggled news of the exploits of Bengali guerrilla warriors, the Muktibahini: “Where is Mother Bangladesh? Where? Her brave children will rescue me from here” (Osman, 2013, p. 27). Lentin observes that genocide and wars are “often feminised through the positioning of women not only as sexual trophies exchangeable between male enemies, not only as markers of collective boundaries, but also as the symbolic representations of national and ethnic collectivities” (Lentin, 1999, p. 1). Considering that the nation’s honour in South Asia is widely understood to be synonymous with women’s chastity, the violation of Bengali women during the war was understood as being less about women themselves and more as a slur on the “honour” of the Bengali nation and the masculinity of Bengali nationalists (D’Costa, 2016, p. 73). Sobhan (1994) documents some evidence of how the idea of planting as many Pakistani seeds in the “inferior” Bengali wombs played a major role in shaping the image of the war in the western wing. Nekre Aranya not only demonstrates how the Pakistani army incorporated systematic rape as a tool to raze Bengali cultural dignity to the ground, but also provides evidence of Bengalis as well as women themselves internalizing the notion of women as repositories of national honour. Thus, in this scene, women believe that their dishonour will elicit a response from Mother Bangladesh herself, since it is, in effect, her chastity that has been symbolically violated.

Of further interest is the women’s faith in Mother Bangladesh’s “children,” quite obviously male children, in “rescuing” them. Representing warfare as “militarized performances of masculinity” (D’Costa, 2014, p. 458) between demonic outsiders and citizen-heroes, the novel underpins the conventional protector/protected gender binary and a patriarchal sense of honour and responsibility for protecting women. When a mukti joddha proclaims, “Mothers and sisters who are here, it is my regret that I won’t have the opportunity to avenge your dishonour. But humanity is not dead in Bangladesh. My young brothers will teach a befitting lesson to these beasts indeed […]” (Osman, 2013, p. 46). Reiterated addresses as “mothers and sisters” reminds one of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman’s designation of biranganas as “daughters and sisters” (Siddiqi, 2016, p. 4), and the paternalistic patriarchal framework of nationalist movements and state benevolence.

Traditional approaches towards war equate victory with masculinity and defeat with effeminacy, the inability to protect one’s women being the marker of quintessential unmanliness. Here, the violence inflicted on women’s bodies becomes less about the experience of the women and more about masculine identity. Such narratives operate within specific ideas of masculinity and not only create a clear dichotomy between the organized military forces of West Pakistan and the Bengali guerrillas, but also reinforce essentialist conceptions of gender roles in war. Keeping in mind the popular perception of Bengali men as unfit for military service, which dates back to colonial concepts of masculinity,6 one could argue that such overt plots of male combat serve to conceal repressed masculine anxiety about emasculation and female empowerment. As Nayanika Mookherjee (2015) observes,

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6 For more on this, see Sinha (1995).
The west Pakistani army apparently saw these Kafers as small-boned, short [...], dark, lazy, effeminate, bheto (rice- and fish-eating and cowardly), half-Muslim Bengalis of the river plains, in contrast to themselves, supposedly broad-boned, tall, fair, wheat-eating, warrior-like, resilient, manly, brave Muslims of the rough topography of Pakistan. (p. 164)

Thus, in the works of many early male writers, including Osman, one can find the determination to prove the manliness of Bengali soldiers—they are not only “men enough” but also “superior” men who “protect” the nation’s women instead of violating them, and are, therefore, more suited for nation-building than their adversaries.

**Convenient Deaths and Elimination of Women**

When men’s actions take center stage, the dynamic role that women played in the war is oversimplified. This shows the complicated links between nationalist and patriarchal politics. It is surprising that hardly any war fiction from the early years by male writers depicts such active participation by women as is evidenced in Figs.1.1 and 1.2. Even if a more active role is imagined for women in these writings, their agency almost invariably results in their death and convenient disappearance from the plot. Suicide is a common strategy for removing raped women from the plots of novels, plays, and films (Mookherjee, 2015, p. 182). The propitious moments in which these deaths occur in *Nekre Aranya* raise interesting questions about what possible situations the writer avoids portraying by introducing these timely deaths in the plot.

The imminent threat of a muktijoddha, referred to as “golden son” (Osman, 2013, p. 48), being killed in interrogation, triggers a discussion of rebellion among the incarcerated women. Rashida Bibi, who once thought that revolting against the soldiers was futile and the only resort was passive prayers to God, confronts a Pakistani captain and gets brutally raped in retaliation. Another woman rushes to her rescue and gets shot to death for the crime. Thus, women’s rebellions, feeble as they are, have no concrete, positive outcome in the world of the novel.

Life in the rape camp seems to have robbed the women of their desire to live, and many prefer death over a life of dishonour, thus demonstrating how the notion of shame percolates from the public national sphere to the private sphere of women’s perception of themselves. The novel ends in multiple suicides, with women hanging themselves using their petticoats from a hook in the ceiling, and, in a particularly gruesome scene described in minute details, a woman disembowling herself using her unnaturally long nails. It appears that the only agency women can display is in ending their own lives.

Such timely exits of the violated women from the plot circumvent questions of rehabilitation and return to pre-war everyday life. Notions of honour associated with women’s bodies have a long and troubling history in South Asia. Butalia (1998) recounts the mass suicide of 90 Sikh women in Rawalpindi during the 1947 riots, an incident remembered with admiration and pride because these self-slaughters are viewed as safeguards for the community’s “purity” (pp. 146-84). D’Costa (2011) records about the rape survivors of the 1971 war, “Those families that could afford to take their daughters to India or a Western country preferred to do so, in order to get rid of their family ‘shame’ as quietly as possible” (p. 126). The “undesirability” of the violated women could be conveniently tackled, at least in the fictional realm, through the effortless solution of well-timed suicides, without having to engage with difficult questions of reintegration into the community.

Similar convenient deaths can be found in other contemporary texts such as Haq’s *At the Sound of Marching Feet* (2017), where a raped woman publicly accuses her father of collaboration with the army, comes out as a birangana, but, in the end, drinks poison to take her own life. This attests to the playwright’s inability to create a fictional world where there is a position of respect for the biranganas. Thus, the figure of the violated woman, after having
served her purpose in the plot, is ultimately expendable. Similarly, in Najmul Alam’s “Sada Shapla” (1978), translated as “The White Lily” (2001), Sajeda is raped by Pakistani soldiers equated to “lustful dogs” (p. 86). She fails in her attempt to convince her husband that her pregnancy is not a consequence of the rape, and she is indeed pregnant with his child. The story ends with her committing suicide soon after childbirth, with her family members observing how her new-born looks exactly like her husband, thereby proving her “virtue” and “purity” after she has been safely removed from the plot. A story like this reveals the absence of space for raped women as well as war babies, both of whom must be kept away from view in the newly independent nation.

The novel also abstains from bringing up complicated issues such as post-war government-sponsored abortions. Nilima Ibrahim (1998) writes about Sheikh Mujib’s response to her concern about war babies, “Send the children who have no identity of their father abroad…I do not want to keep polluted blood in this country” (as cited in Mohsin, 2016, p. 50). State-sponsored programmes, local clinics, and international organisations conducted thousands of post-war abortions (D’Costa, 2011, p. 134), which the novel carefully avoids mentioning, even though they are happening contemporaneously. D’Costa (2011) argues that this policy was motivated by the fact that the war babies served as graphic reminders of what happened in 1971 (p. 134), and the “purity” of the nation was of greater significance than the trauma of women (p. 135). Motherhood is revered, but not the kind of transgressive motherhood that results from violation by “foreign enemies.” Silence about war babies and their mothers implicates such literary discourses in the state’s policy of coerced abortions.

One could argue that the lack of temporal distance from the war and the exhilaration of recently won liberation contribute to such a discourse. In addition, it is understandable that a narrative of hope and promise is essential for a war-devastated new nation prone to annual natural disasters, weighed down by internal conflicts, economic hardships, and dismantled physical infrastructure. To serve this purpose, a sentimental discourse of absolute (male) bravery, heroism, and sacrifice in the service of the nation is much more useful than an interrogation of socio-cultural attitudes towards sexually violated women. However, such discourses not only complicated responses towards biranganas at the time, but also ended up having serious consequences for future attempts at justice-seeking. Thus, the “masculinist state’s acute anxiety over the (potential) pollution of the body politic and the urgent need to excise impurity” (Siddiqi, 2016, p. 13) can be seen reflected in many early male-authored cultural productions.

Conclusion

Certain overwhelming images of biranganas are embedded in the public imagination, aided and abetted by various media representations. Countless literary and visual representations—films, newspaper articles, photographs—have contributed to the overpowering depiction of the Biranganas as helpless, passive, mute women in need of rescue. Elsewhere, the figure of the violated woman has been collapsed with the image of the nation, thus making her experience symbolic instead of individual. The narrative revolving around raped women is deeply intertwined with the narrative of the nation, as the dishonour of individual women is understood as the humiliation of the Bengali nation as a whole.

Various actors on the stage of national politics have used the cause of the biranganas to serve their vested interests, using the violated women as pawns in political power games. Although representations of women’s victimhood at the hands of foreign and internal enemies served to unite the nation in the spirit of patriotism during the war, there was no space in the nationalist rhetoric for these women in post-war nation-making processes. Women were meant to be protected and rescued; nation-building was left in the competent hands of the protectors and rescuers. In “the defeated nation being reborn as a triumphant woman” (Boland, 1989, p.
there was no space to accommodate women whose sexual violation might be culturally perceived as defilation or pollution. Thus, despite the government’s attempts at rehabilitation through cottage industry ventures and even an impressive dowry in marriage, the social stigma attached to rape was hard to shed, and it all boiled down to the empty and deeply ambiguous title of birangana. The state’s problematic ventures of enforced abortions and adoptions of war babies further complicated the situation.

The novel studied in this paper throws light upon the peculiar nature of public memory, which chooses to remember women’s violations during war in a certain “acceptable” way. In a manner akin to state speeches and policies, it attempts to create a patriotic space through eulogizing the passive sacrifice of women for their nation and utilizing narratives of rape as representative examples of Bengali victimisation at the hands of brutal Pakistanis, circumventing accounts of post-war exclusion and ostracism faced by these women. The lack of agency of female characters, with respect to Pakistani soldiers as well as Bengali men, is also typical of early war fiction written by male authors. Women in these writings mostly cry, die, or have themselves rescued by valiant guerrillas. These writings challenge readers to consider what kind of man should have rightful dominance over others, but they do not address the patriarchal exclusion of women from the nation-building process. Osman’s novel, like the Bangladeshi state’s approach of “incorporation” towards rape survivors, might be read as “progressive” for the times (Siddiqi, 2016, p. 4), but it sidesteps the undeniable socio-cultural ambiguity towards rape victims. In hindsight, a book like Nekre Aranya seems problematic because it (perhaps unintentionally) reinforces patriarchal values and celebrates war in a way that is romanticized and seen as a manly thing to do.

In recent years, along with fiction writers like Shaheen Akhtar and Ruby Zaman, feminist researchers like Nay入ika Mookherjee, Yasmin Saikia, Dina M. Siddiqi, Amena Hossain, and Neelima Ibrahim have attempted to exhume the memories of women during the Bangladesh War. Several civil society organizations like Ain O Salish Kendra (ASK) are endeavouring to bring women’s lived experiences of the 1971 war to the surface. Nevertheless, a feminist rewriting of the war narrative is only in its initial stages, and the institutional gaps in addressing sexual violence remain conspicuous. However, even though a revisionist feminist history of the 1971 war is still in its embryonic stages, activism aimed at justice for wartime rape survivors is manifesting itself in various socio-cultural, academic, and political arenas. For instance, following a debate over nomenclature, in October 2014, 43 years after the war, the Jatiya Muktijoddha Council (National Freedom Fighters’ Council) formally recognized biranganas as mukti joddhas (liberation warriors), followed by a gazette notification from the Ministry of Liberation War Affairs in 2015 recognizing 41 biranganas as muktijoddhas (D’Costa, 2016, p. 77).

After decades of neglect, recent years have witnessed a surge of interest in the wartime experiences of women. Manzu Islam’s novel Song of Our Swampland (2010) narrates the story of a woman who becomes the commander of guerrilla forces during the war. Shaheen Akhtar’s Talaash (2004), based on the author’s own involvement with ASK, depicts a rape survivor’s relentless struggle and tenacious will to survive in an antagonistic post-war society. Such narratives of female agency can begin to close the gap between violence and gender justice and make space for discourses of women’s active participation in the war. The structurally embedded gender discrimination that posits women as passive victims, bystanders, and symbolic metaphors is beginning to be challenged by a recent interest in memorialisation of the wide range of roles that women played during the war. Such projects, albeit belated, bode well for the representation and recognition of women’s subjective experiences during the war.
References


