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Prashant Maurya

*Indian Institute of Management Ranchi, India*

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Reviewed by Prashant Maurya

The Gendered War, authored by Sanjib Kr Biswas and Priyanka Tripathi, evaluates select feminist ethnographic narratives to uncover the role and contribution of women in the Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971. The nine months long ghastly war that started on ethnic and political grounds took millions of lives, leaving behind hundreds of thousands of families devastated, dislocated and disappeared. In light of the intensity of the war and the state-sponsored genocide that took place, resulting in significant damage to the lives of civilians in Bangladesh and the birth of the country, numerous research studies have been undertaken to assess its impact. While doing so, the studies and research mainly focused on the men’s contribution and participation in the war, thus excluding women’s contribution and role. For a long time, the chauvinist discourses and deliberations have kept hidden the history of women during the event. Biswas and Tripathi attempt to unravel contemporary discourses and representations of women victims of war by reading select fictional and nonfiction texts related to the war.

Research and studies on the Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971 continue to date due to the conflicting nature and interpretations of various narratives produced about the event. The current book is part of the growing body of literature that explores the role of gender and women’s experiences during the war. Other contemporary research that has touched on this issue include Antara Ghatak’s article on negotiating gender and disability in the Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971, where she examines the relation between body and power and extensive sexual violence perpetrated against women (p. 95). Firdous Azim has also published a chapter “The Forgotten Women of 1971: Bangladesh’s Failure to Remember to Rape Victims of the Liberation War,” which focuses on the forgotten rape victims of the war and the role of feminist historiography in foregrounding these biranganas (p. 58). Politico-Military Strategy of the Bangladesh Liberation War, 1971 by Guru Saday Batabyal, published in 2020, is another recent work that rekindles the scholarly interest in the topic.

Since the event led to the birth of Bangladesh, stories of heroism, dedication, contribution and sacrifice naturally form the nation’s collective memory. Despite numerous histories and narratives that have emerged since the end of the war, there has been a failure to accurately represent women and give them the credit they deserved for their roles and contributions during the conflict. The Gendered War brings forth those obscured voices by discussing fictional and non-fictional counter-narratives. In five chapters of their book, the authors attempt to recapitulate the gendered victims of the war. The introductory chapter, “The Gendered History of the 1971 War and Women’s Narratives,” provides a historical perspective on the book’s premise. With a section on the convergence of history and literature, the chapter briefly overviews the 1971 War in Bangladesh. Two sections are devoted to women and war and the women of the 1971 War in postcolonial writing, followed by specialized sections on feminist narratives, gendered history, and women of the 1971 War in feminist narratives.

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2 Prashant Maurya is Assistant Professor of English, Indian Institute of Management Ranchi, India. Email: prashant.maurya@iimranchi.ac.in
3 This term is the title awarded by the Government of Bangladesh to women raped during the Bangladesh Liberation War by the Pakistan army and local collaborators.
In the second chapter, “Relocating the Women of the 1971 War in History,” the authors offer a feminist reading of select historiography, namely Zafar Iqbal’s *Muktijudder Itihas* (2008), Bangladesh government’s official publication *Bangladesher Shadhinota Juddha: Dolipotro* ([1982] 2009), Srinath Raghavan’s *1971: A Global History of the Creation of Bangladesh* (2008), Iftikhar Malik’s *The History of Pakistan* (2013), and Willem van Schendel’s *A History of Bangladesh* (2009). One representative historical account from India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh and one global has been read to highlight the gendered nature of women’s historical representations in the war.

The third chapter, “Women of the 1971 War in Fictional Narratives,” establishes a connection between ethnographic interventions and a few feminist novels based on the 1971 War—Dilruba Z. Ara’s *Blame* (2015), Tahmima Anam’s *A Golden Age* (2007), and Kamila Shamsie’s *Kartography* (2002) The chapter discusses how these works have foregrounded women’s positive agency in nation-building and service. The female characters, such as Laila in Ara’s *Blame* and Rehana in Anam’s *A Golden Age*, have transcended physical and psychological torture and performed multifaceted roles.

Non-fiction can also uncover truths about genocides such as the one under discussion. In chapter four, titled “Women of the 1971 War in Narrative Nonfiction,” the authors read texts of feminist ethnographers attempting to unravel women’s patriarchal representation in the 1971 War. While texts such as Neelima Ibrahim’s *A War Heroine, I Speak* (1994) and Nayanika Mookherjee’s *The Spectral Wound* (1971) shed light on the role and contribution of the *biranganas* who have struggled and suffered sexual violence during the war, personal narratives and first-hand accounts in texts such as Sarmila Bose’s *Dead Reckoning: Memories of the 1971 Bangladesh War* (2011) and Yasmin Saikia’s *Women, War, and the Making of Bangladesh: Remembering 1971* (2011) have helped to understand the less discussed victimization of Bihari women by the Bengali nationalists. The concluding chapter, “Feminist Narratives of 1971: the Present and the Future,” points out how feminist ethnographic narratives have been crucial in providing women with their lost space in history. In such narratives, they hold a central position, unlike traditional historiography where they have a marginal existence.

The present book reflects upon the partial and biased nature of historiography regarding women’s treatment. The gendered representation has valorized the men but left behind the women who sacrificed their honour and dignity in the war. The authors analyze the narratives that give an alternate view of valorizing women’s contribution to the 1971 War. It invigorated the women victims by giving them agency and filling the lacuna in their recognition, such as the alternate representation of *birangana* and the plight of Bihari women who suffered at the hands of Bengali nationalists during the ongoing war.

The book is designed lucidly, and the core discussions are preceded by notes on history to make readers aware of the context within which this discussion is rooted. One inadequacy of the book is that it reiterates specific claims in multiple repetitive instances. Also, the authors’ viewpoints are expressed minimally, and the book turns out to be a review of notable books rather than critically dealing with the research premise at times. However, by placing the case of female participants in a watershed South Asian historical event that has been less talked about before global academia, the book makes a significant contribution to the literature on the Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971. By highlighting women’s experiences during the war, as represented in select texts, the book sheds new light on an often-overlooked aspect of the conflict and expands the scholarly discourse on the Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971.
References