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**Trauma of the Women, Trauma of the Nation: A Feminist
Discourse on Izzat**

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I Smell Corpses in the Air

Virgin mothers stiffen with the shame of putrid birth,
Swadhinota—are you a wasted birth?
Are you the shame of a bastard child's mother?

The national flag today is clutched by ancient vultures.

My eyes don't fall asleep—
half awake I hear the screams of the raped ones,
I see corpses floating in the river,
young girl's headless body rotten and eaten by dogs.
My eyes still remember it all.

Wrapped in a sheet of blood are the corpses of my brother, my mother,
my beloved father—eaten by dogs, preyed on by vultures.

Swadhinota—I have gained you after losing all my near ones,
Swadhinota—I have bought you—a priceless crop—paid off with blood,
Sari of my raped sister, is my bloody national flag.

--Rudro Muhammad Shahidullah
(Translated by: Rubaiyat Hossain)

**We gained our sovereignty in exchange of losing three million lives and *izzat* of our
mothers and sisters.¹**

¹ Sarkar, Belal. *Uccho Maddhomik Itihash*. Dhaka: Hasan Books, 1998, 198.

Introduction:

The Problem of Rape: Issues of Representation

Bangladesh became a sovereign nation on December 16, 1971. The national rhetoric is: our sovereignty or *swadhinota* has cost us three million lives and two hundred thousand women's 'izzat'.²

Liberation War Museum in Dhaka documents mass rape of women during war time. The *sari* of the raped woman is regarded as the national flag by poet-activist Rudra Muhammad Shahidullah. When I interviewed Dr. Muntasir Mamoon, a history professor at Dhaka University on December 16, 2005 he said, "there is no need to 'dig out' the narratives of rape from 1971 because the phrase, 'two hundred thousand mothers and sisters lost their *izzat*' has become a part of our diction" (Hossain, interview, 2005).

If one looks at the national history of Bangladesh from a patriarchal-mainstream point of view then, it seems that, the raped women of 1971 are not forgotten. These women appear in national history text books, popular literature, and even in the museum! However, if one looks through a gender specific lens then, the overall ambiguity around the representation of the raped women of 1971 becomes far more problematic.

Fist of all, since 1971 there has been a systematic effort to wipe out the raped women from the highest official state records and state sanctioned national history. Secondly, in the overall representation these women are drained off their individuality as they always appear in relation to others—most commonly as mothers and sisters. Finally, in the national narrative, rape is conveniently summarized as the loss of *izzat*, which redeems rape during war time as unimportant and re-emphasizes *izzat* or chastity as one of the founding pillars of Bengali national imagination.

Successful management of the war baby scenario in post war Bangladesh became a challenge for the newly formed state. The nation had failed to protect its women, and the failure had to be rendered unproblematic by destroying historical records about the raped women.

Literary connections have been drawn between rape in 1971, and the contemporary failure of the nation-state in delivering its promises of democracy and secularism. As Bangladesh went through martial law (Ziaur Rahman 1975-1981), autocracy (Hussain Muhammad Ershad 1982-1990), and the recent threat of militant religious nationalism (1991-present), the failure of the nation-state has been paralleled with "virgin mother's shame of a putrid birth" (Shahidullah 1994, 10). As the state fails to deliver the promises of the 1971 freedom movement, the poet asks, "*Swadhinota*—are you a wasted birth? Are you the shame of a bastard child's mother?" (Shahidullah 1994, 10).

As the failure of the nation state is linked to the shamed memory of rape, and the wasted birth of a fatherless child, women are located in the realms of national imagination, symbolism and ideology. This paper charts the ambiguity that arises from such iconic representation of women, and sheds light on the historical consequence of

² Dictionary meaning: *Izzat* n. prestige, dignity, honor, chastity. *Izzat noshto kora* (Violating one's *izzat*)—to spoil or lose one's prestige, to dishonor or to lose honor, to violate one's chastity or to have one's chastity violated.

denying women's individual experiences of rape to exist in the national narrative of the nation.

***Birangona*³: Heroic Woman or the Shamed One?**

The title '*Birangona*' or 'Heroic Woman' was bestowed upon the rape survivors after the war in 1971 to normalize the tension around the issue of mass rape. This was an effort to claim at least a minimum level of respectability for these women. However, the first and foremost concern of state run rehabilitation program was abortion. The second goal was to blend the raped women into the society by destroying official records from the rehabilitation center, and merging raped women's rehabilitation programs into the overall rehabilitation of war affected women. The government even took initiatives to marry these women off by offering lucrative dowries, "the demands of the men have ranged from the latest model of Japanese car painted red, to the publication of unpublished poems" (Brownmiller 1975, 83). On the whole, coining of the term '*Birangona*' did not gain the raped women any respectability, rather it denoted their identities as women who lost their *izzat*; thus, the term '*Birangona*' or 'Heroic Woman' became equivalent to the 'shamed one.'

As Faustina Pereira points out, the cost of claiming oneself as a *Birangona* is too high, besides the title *Birangona* in itself offers a limited and stigmatized privilege. In this context, claiming oneself as a *Birangona* means, "focusing on the scar of the rape victim, thus forcing her to risk social death" (Pereira 2002, 62). Under this framework, even women who willingly give interviews for oral testimonies shy away from accepting *Birangona* as their identity. This further complicates the template of representation, as rape once again is blurred with non sexual modes of violence and suffering during wartime. Even Ferdousi Priyobhashini, the only middle class woman to have disclosed her memory of rape does not prefer the term *Birangona*, "I thought it was a low profile word, I did not think of it as glorious" (Hossain, interview, 2005).

As I will argue, *Birangona*'s loss of *izzat* labels her as the fallen woman, and the only option left for her in the national history is to observe silence; while she is represented as the heroic mother or sister who gave up her most valuable asset—her *izzat* for the sake of the nation. In this framework of representation, once again women's individual trauma and experiences of rape are pushed to the corner, and women's unlimited ability to sacrifice for the national cause is glorified. Thus, *Birangonas* are not completely wiped out from the national history and public memory; rather they have been systematically pushed into the corners of the less official historical documents.

It is necessary to highlight the relationship between nation and women, and locate chastity or *izzat* in the template of Bengali national imagination in order to understand the inclination of the official national history to push the raped women of 1971 out of the center of historical recordkeeping.

Women-Nation-Izzat: Selective Historical Record Keeping:

In the recent years feminist scholars have drawn lines of complexity between women and the nation (Vickers 1990; Yuval-Davis 1997; Yuval-Davis-Werbner 1999).⁴

³ Dictionary meaning: *Birangona* n. a heroic woman, a hero's wife. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman declared the sexually violated women war victims as *Birangonas* or War Heroines with the intention of gaining back their social respectability, and acknowledging their contribution in Bangladesh's liberation movement.

In the South Asian context, a culture specific construction of femininity has been noted as an integral part of imagining the nation (Chatterjee 1993; Chakrabarty 2000). Gendered symbolization of the nation (women as nation)⁵, and women's role as the signifier of nation's cultural identity (nation as women)⁶ creates a framework where women "as bodies and cultural repositories" (Peterson 1998, 44) transform into the battle ground of national struggle. Women's bodies signified as the territorial landmass become targeted to mutilation and rape; the womb, thereby, becomes a tool for ethnic cleansing.⁷ Rape also works as a weapon to morally defeat the enemy by invading their "inner domain of sovereignty" (Chatterjee 1992, 242), thus, creating a long lasting rupture in the core of national morale.

The iconification of 'women as the nation' creates a framework of imagination where women's bodies appear literally as the map of the country. The spatial connection drawn between the female body and the territorial landmass symbolizes women as the nation. Rabindranath Tagore's famous song, '*Amar Shonar Bangla*' or 'My Golden Bengal' [the national anthem of Bangladesh] uses this template of representation as the landscape of Bengal transforms into different parts of the female body. The mother's face, her smile, the ends of her sari all become diffused in the visualization of the nation as the female entity assumes a maternal role,

"Oh mother, in autumn, I have seen your sweet smile in the harvesting fields, Alas! What I behold, your sweet smile, my golden Bengal, I love you...what a sight, what a shade, what gentle love, what attachment you have spread with the ends of you sari..."⁸

As the ends of the mother's sari become the umbrella of national solidarity, motherhood is politicized and "stereotypically situated" (Mookherjee 2003, 157) at the breaking down point between the public/private dichotomy.⁹ The iconification of 'women as nation', on the other hand, imposes the qualities of the nation on to women. For instance, nineteenth century Bengali nationalism sought its unique, spiritually superior, and private domain by locating unique national attributes in Bengali women. Women, thus, became the ground

⁴ Yuval-Davis, N., *Gender and Nation*, London: Sage Publications, 1997, Werbner, P, 'Political Motherhood and Feminisation of Citizenship: Women's Activisms and Transformatoin of Publish Sphere,' in N. Yuval-Davis and P. Werbner (eds), *Women, Citizenship and Difference*, London: Zed Books, 1999.

⁵ By 'Women as Nation' I refer to the national imagination, which imposes the attributes of women to the nation. For example-Ravi Varma's painting *Bharat Mata* imposes a woman's physical attribute in visualizing the map of India. This could be understood as a spatial attribute where women's bodies literally become the territorial landmass of the country.

⁶ By 'Nation as Woman' I refer to the national imagination, which imposes the attributes of the nation on women. Partha Chatterjee in 'The Nation and Its Women' discusses the national positioning of women in the *private-spiritual-ahistoric-timeless* domain of nationalism. This domain was considered superior to the West based on a spiritual-material dichotomy where East was superior to the West due to the spiritual nature of its inner domain of sovereignty. In this imagination women were drained of their individual freedom and locked into a timeless zone of nationalism to uphold cultural symbolism of spiritual superiority over the West.

⁷ Similar example could be found in the case of Bosnia-Herzegovina and Rwanda.

⁸ Tagore, Rabindranath, *Swarabitan*, 46, 1905, this song was banned from Pakistan Radio, which gave rise to patriotic emotion of Bengali nationalism. Thus, this song later became the national anthem when Bangladesh was formed as an independent state.

⁹ Werbner, P, 'Political Motherhood and Feminisation of Citizenship: Women's Activisms and Transformation of Public Sphere,' in N. Yuval-Davis and P. Werbner (eds), *Women, Citizenship and Difference*, London: Zed Books, 1999.

upon, which nineteenth century Bengali nationalism flourished and modernity was authored.¹⁰

As women's 'chastity,' the central element of Bengali nationalist imagination was lost and "the conquered status of masculine impotence" (Brownmiller 1975, 38) was confronted with the real, at-hand problem of war babies, rape of Bangladeshi women during the nine months of *Muktijuddho*, posed a great threat to the national imagination.

I will argue that, the *Birangonas*' threat to the national imagination is not only rendered unproblematic, but also made to appear in coherence with the ideology that, women's 'chastity' is the upholder of nation's sacred-inner-private-cultural domain of identity by a two fold process of, *a.* selective official recordkeeping on one hand, and *b.* mainstream literary and visual solutions on the other.

Historical Record Keeping: A Hierarchical Ladder

In the realms of state apparatus, information about *Birangonas* is carefully removed from the highest official historic archives, such as the Ministry of Liberation War Affairs, national history text books, and the state run rehabilitation and welfare programs. *Birangonas* thereby, find a place in the 'less' official historic archives such as the *Banglapedia*¹¹, *Bangladesh Shadhinota Juddho Dolil Potro* or Bangladesh Liberation War documents,¹² Liberation War Research Center¹³ and Liberation War Museum.¹⁴

The marginalized status of *Birangonas* in the official narrative of Bangladesh's national history is further accentuated by the fact that, women's individual experiences of rape, its verbal expression in the form of women's speeches are only tolerated in women's oral testimonies published by NGOs, and fictional literature, even in which context the topic of 'rape' is uncomfortably dealt with. The oral testimonies often speak indirectly about 'rape,' rather it is implied, hinted towards, even blurred with non-sexual modes of violence during the nine months of *Muktijuddho*. Thus, women's experiences of rape and emotional expressions of it become further marginalized *even* in the realm of 'less' official historic recordkeeping. These voices remain locked in the realm of fiction writing, far fetched from the grasp of official history writing procedures. As a result, rape as a war crime is rendered irrelevant, and the visibility of rape in the over all history of *Muktijuddho* is reduced to a minimum significance.

Systematic Marginalization of Birangonas

¹¹ *Banglapedia* or the encyclopedia of Bangladesh was published by the Asiatic Society of Bangladesh in 2003. *Birangonas*, in this particular text, appear as a footnote to war-babies.

¹² *Bangladesh Shadhinota Juddho Dolil Potro* or Bangladesh Liberation War Documents is a fifteen volume documents of *Muktijuddho*. This document was compiled and published under *Muktijuddher Itihas Lekhon O Mudron Prokolpo* or Liberation War History Writing and Printing Project under the Ministry of Information between 1977 and 1987. Possession of this document is currently vested to the Ministry of Liberation War Affairs.

¹³ *Muktijuddho* Research Center or Liberation War Research Center was established in 1996 and now operates under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Liberation War Affairs.

¹⁴ Liberation War Museum or *Muktijuddho Jadughor* was established on 22nd March, 1996 by few veterans of *Muktijuddho* and currently operates through an eleven member board of trustees. This is a private venture. *Muktijuddho Jadughor* is registered under NGO Bureau Bangladesh.

The marginalized space assigned to *Birangonas* in the overall history of *Muktijuddho* has to be understood within the context of multiple lines of historiography that exist in Bangladesh. Whereas, the Ministry of Liberation War Affairs, state rehabilitation programs, and national text books could be regarded as the official documents sanctioned and approved by the state—ventures like *Banglapedia* published by the Asiatic Society of Bangladesh falls under the category of academic writing holding no influence over the highest authority of state record keeping. Similarly, the Liberation War Research Center and *Bangladesher Shadhinota Juddo Dolil Potro* or Bangladesh Liberation War Documents even though under the jurisdictions of the Ministry has no authority over it. Rather, the Ministry stands in the position of indisputable power and possession of all their documents to change or omit any information regarding women from the mentioned sources, which is not unlikely to happen given information about the *Birangonas* have been removed from the recent national history text books.¹⁵ The *Birangonas*' already marginalized position in the historical narrative of Bangladesh reaches its ultimate epitome when the 2005 edition of Secondary School history book '*Bangladesh O Prachin Biswa Itihash*' or 'The History of Bangladesh and Ancient World,' published by the National Board of Education, makes no reference to those 200,000 mothers and sisters who lost their *izzat* during the nine months' of *Muktijuddho*.

When I interviewed Delwar Hossain Patwari, Senior Assistant Secretary at the Ministry about what information his department could offer about *Birangonas* or the sexually violated women of 1971, he looked at me for a long moment and then asked, "are *Birangonas* freedom fighters? Are they war affected freedom fighters? What *are* they?" (Hossain, interview, 2005). The central dilemma regarding the *Birangonas*' status in the official history of *Muktijuddho* was delivered to me: '*Birangona*' though became a title bestowed upon the sexually violated women of 1971, and the title was widely used in cinema, literature and public talk, it was *actually* never made official in any government documents. No legislations were ever passed or policy implemented to officially instate what the title *Birangona* actually means in the context of Bangladeshi national history. Thus, today the Ministry of Liberation War Affairs recognizes *Muktijoddhas* or freedom fighters, *Juddhahoto Muktijoddhas* or war affected freedom fighters, but the tile *Birangona* does not register in their official dictionary. When it comes to the sexually violated women of 1971, the ministry turns a blind eye to them given these women are no where instated in official state documents and policy making procedures.

Mr. Patwari mentioned that, information about *Birangonas* were not recorded for '*shonggoto*' meaning obvious reasons, after all, these women had to be married off, or resettled with the families if married previously. There was no room to speak about the violence inflicted on their minds and bodies for the long nine months, the only option was to seal their mouths, and erase the experience of rape. Shame is the barrier, which restricts information about rape to be disseminated. Though this shame is understood to

¹⁵ Chakrabarti, Ratan Lal, Shahnewaz, A.K.M. *Bangladesh O Prachin Bishwa Shobhotar Itihash*. Dhaka: Jatiya Shikkha O Paddho Pustak Board, 2005, 104-120. The *Birangonas*' already marginalized position in the historical narrative of Bangladesh reaches its final limit when the 2005 edition of Secondary School history book '*Bangladesh O Prachin Biswa Itihash*' or 'The History of Bangladesh and Ancient World' published by the National Board of Education makes no reference to those 200,000 mothers and sisters who lost their *izzat* or chastity during the nine months *Muktijuddho*.

be as women's shame, it actually is the shame of the Bengali masculinity since, "[R]ape by a conqueror is compelling evidences of the conquered's status of masculine impotence" (Brownmiller 1975, 38). Husbands turned down their raped wives because, "[T]he hallowed rights of property have been abused, and the property herself is held culpable" (Brownmiller 1975, 40). The only way women could compensate for losing their *izzat* was by observing total silence. The silence in this case is observed, on behalf of these women, by the ministry, which denies to officially recognize the *Birangonas*.

Muktijoddha Kallyan Trust or Freedom Fighters' Welfare Trust, now operates under the Ministry of Liberation War Affairs, and was originally established in 1984. Md. Abdul Hannan, the *Kallyan* Trust Managing Director, explained that the *Birangona* issue was not talked about very much because, as he put it, "*meyeder baparto*" or "after all, its about the girls," "they had to be married off; that's why the government did not highlight it, and most families preferred to keep it as a secret, and most families did not come for rehabilitation" (Hossain, interview, 2005). The rehabilitation of the *Birangonas* was kept completely separate from official rehabilitation program. While the *Birangonas* were tackled within a quasi-formal, quasi-legal domesticized parameter of rehabilitation, the official foundation stone for the *Muktijoddha Kallyan Trust* was laid in the President's Order No. 94, as an official government apparatus to help war affected freedom fighters. Once again, this involved neatly removing the war affected women from the surface of the legal state apparatus and official record keeping.

The oral history project under the *Muktijuddho* Research Center started in 1996, and documented 2,500 interviews from eleven different zones of the country. The usual interview procedures consisted of field workers setting up interview spaces in local schools, or houses of the local influential figures, and making a list of local cultural activists, teachers, social elites and members of the *Muktijoddha* of freedom fighters club. Those who have participated in the armed conflict, those who were tortured, those who organized cultural, social, or economic activities to support the *Muktijuddho*, and finally those who have witnessed *Muktijuddho* from close proximity were targeted for interviews. It must be noted that, there were no special arrangement made for women to be interviewed in private spaces. It is apparent that in a rural Bangladeshi setting where women's honor is central to the socio-cultural and religious network of kinship and community pride, it requires private arrangements for women to comfortably share their experiences of sexual abuse.

Even though *Bangladesher Shadhinota Juddho Dolil Potro* or Bangladesh Liberation War Documents document gives a small account of rape in 1971, it still fails to provide a concrete count of women who were raped. Systematic information on sexual slavery in the barracks is also absent, and based on this document the total number of women enslaved in the barracks remains imprecise. The eighth volume of the *Bangladesher Shadhinota Juddho O Dolil Potro* or Bangladesh Liberation War Documents is the only source in the official documents of *Muktijuddho* to have given space to incidents and accounts of rape from 1971. In the total 227 oral testimonies recorded in the eighth volume, 23 are of women, 11 of whom spoke of experiences of sexual violation.

The ultimate impossibility of writing a history of the sexually violated women of 1971 is the confusing figures of women who were raped, impregnated, and killed. The

number of rape victims range from 40,000 to 250,000,¹⁶ the number of abortions range from 23,000¹⁷ to 50,000,¹⁸ and the number of war babies range from 400 to 10,000.¹⁹ Since the state is unable to produce concrete numbers the question remains unresolved. Absence of the backbone of official historical documents—the facts and figures, further complicates the process of incorporating *Birangonas*' narratives in the official national history of Bangladesh.

Thirty-seven years after independence the state is still struggling to come up with a comprehensive list of freedom fighters. This is symptomatic of the fact that, official archival data on *Muktijuddho*, according to the state authority in Bangladesh is still being compiled, collected, constructed, and reconstructed. As the history of *Muktijuddho* is reconstructed in the state of Bangladesh, which has turned significantly towards nationalism based on religious idioms since 1975²⁰—a process is initiated to completely wipe out the signatures of *Birangonas* from the national history of *Muktijuddho*, given they have already been pushed into the footnote to 'war-babies' in *Banglapedia*, and completely removed from the national history text books.

However, the contesting sources of history still exist in forms of women's oral testimonies, fictional and documentary films, and historical fictions. These sources come in conflict with the state approach towards *Muktijuddho* history. Merging the *Birangona*'s voices within the official national history would call into question the Bengali national imagination construction of womanhood, and demand a reform, which would alter the platform of Bengali national imagination altogether, thus *Birangonas* are systematically pushed out of the core of Bangladeshi national history.

'Women as Nation' and 'Nation as Women':

Literary and Visual Solutions to the Birangona Problem

The literary work on 1971 can be roughly divided into two genres: biographical and fictional. The visual genre is also divided into documentary and fiction films. In all these genres, the representation of *Birangonas* is limited to a context in which chastity still plays the biggest role. Death is a primary and immediate solution offered to women in the visual representation. If death, the most respectable solution, was not accepted, then women would have to channel their sexuality in such a way that it would be rendered sexually benign and selflessly serving the community. The autobiographical works by women speak of *Birangonas* from a detached realm of respectability. The fictional solutions, however, take a rather twisted route in locating agency in the womb to rectify the loss of chastity and to rebuild the nation. Finally, the mainstream national literature of 1971 follows the central pattern of representation, where the loss of chastity or *izzat* remains the overarching theme and women's sacrifice in killing themselves prior to enemy invasion of their bodies is looked at as the moral resilience of the nation itself.

¹⁶ Brownmiller, Susan. *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1975, 78-86.

¹⁷ Islam, Shirajul, and Miah Sajahan, eds. *Banglapedia: National Encyclopedia of Bangladesh, Vol-10*. Dhaka: Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 2003, 345-347.

¹⁸ Brownmiller, Susan. *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1975, 78-86.

¹⁹ Islam, Shirajul, and Miah Sajahan, eds. *Banglapedia: National Encyclopedia of Bangladesh, Vol-10*. Dhaka: Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 2003, 345-347.

²⁰ Riaz, Ali. *God Willing: The Politics of Islamism in Bangladesh*. Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers Inc, 2004.

Women's death prior to the violation of their *izzat* is glorified in nationalist narratives such as Muhammad Nurul Qadir's '*Dusho Cheshotti Diney Swadhinota*' (Freedom in 266 Days) to the extent that the mass rape of Bengali women at '*Rokeya Hall*' (the largest women's dormitory in Dhaka University) during Operation Search Light on March 15, 1971, is eliminated from his narrative.

Even though the Bengali women fought for their *izzat* and the freedom of Bangladesh, they failed against the armed military force. In order to protect their sacred *izzat* from West Pakistani invasion, they heroically jumped down from the roof one after another. They preferred death with smiles on their faces, rather than staying alive and becoming prey to the barbaric military force (Qadir 1997, 82).

Women's role in 1971 in the fictional genre is glorified primarily as mothers. When women are represented as mothers, their sexuality automatically is muted and their sexual activities only remain visible in the realms of reproduction and child rearing. The identification of mothers as the nation draws a parallel between the mother's endless endurance and the national resilience to survive against the odds. The mother is also viewed as the singular entity, who, at all times and under all circumstances refuses to let go of the glorified memories of those sons who shed blood and died in 1971. As '*Maa*' or the mother is uplifted to the saintly level and her asexual role of selfless sacrifice is valorized, the loss of chastity of Bengali women in 1971 is completely removed from the narrative of women's involvement in the freedom movement. While the mother guards patriarchal national pride through this remembrance of her son's bloodshed, the loss of chastity becomes irrelevant to the glorious narrative of the nation.²¹

However, there are fictional works of female authors that represent raped women as subjects and carriers of war babies. Here, the topic of rape is written about with intricacy, to locate a sense of purity even in the context of lost chastity. In Selina Hossain's novel '*Kath Koylar Chobi*,' the entire idea of rape and forceful pregnancy is flipped to make the womb a space of resistance and rebellion, holding the agency to rebuild a nation by literally biologically reproducing the members of it. It is this particular use of the female body, and its biological functions, that render the incident of rape and loss of chastity unproblematic, even glorious, in this narrative.

The *Birangonas* in the autobiographical writing of women appear as the 'other,' far removed from the *bhadramahila* reality. Information about mass rape and sexual slavery appear to be inconceivable to the *bharamahilas*, as they dwell in their safe zone of respectability at the core of the national imagination of the home—the sovereign or the higher spiritual moral plain,

The colorful world becomes barren and gray. Food, water, everything seems tasteless, the air poisonous. Oh God! You too sometimes cross the limits of our endurance, you send massacre . . . oh God! save the lives of all mothers' sons. Save women's *izzat*, the best gift you have bestowed them with. (Kamal 1989, 54).

The visual solution offered to the *Birangona* problem is simple and straightforward: they must die. First, there is a real scarcity of cinematic expression of the raped women of 1971, and even when these women appear as subjects in films, they are yet again peripheral and made to leave the landscape by killing themselves or dying at the

²¹ Haq, Anisul, *Maa*, Dhaka: Shomoy, 2003, Haq, Anwara Syed, *Muktijoddhar Maa*, Dhaka: Bidyaprakash, 1992.

end. 'Ora Egaro Jon' or 'Those Eleven' by Chashi Nazrul Islam and 'Agami' or 'Next' by Morshedul Alam depict the *Birangona* character and offer death as a solution. In 'Those Eleven,' one woman hangs herself after getting raped, and another is united momentarily with her fiancé after the war is over and she is released from the army barracks. This union, however, is very short lived as she passes her last breath in her fiancé's arms. The man then picks up her dead body and walks into the camera.

It is this image of the dead body that is celebrated in the visual representation of *Birangonas*. In this template, rape is acknowledged and the burden of it accepted in the newly incepted nation. Similarly, in 'Agami' or 'Next,' the raped woman stands in front of a riverbank preparing to drown herself in the water. This woman is shown dragged across the fields as the ends of her sari drags on the ground and her hair wildly flows in the air. The woman in this visual representation is made to appear as a part of the natural landscape, as her hair and long flowing sari become tangled with the tress. As she is brought into a crop field and raped, her hands clutch on the soil. Thus, the rape of the female body is associated with the rape of the country itself. The very remembrance of the country being invaded and plundered by outside forces is denoted by women being raped, and this is particularly why these women had to leave the narrative by killing themselves.

And What Do the Women Have to Say?

The Problems of Representation:

Who speaks for who becomes the immediate problem in collecting women's oral narratives of 1971. Shaheen Akhter, a historian at *Ain O Shalish Kendra* says, "the process has to be democratic, let there be a space and if someone wants to speak they can utilize that space."²² However, the moral debate among historians is about that very space and nature of disclosure. Whether rape should be given a specific space of its own is a contesting point among historians. Some historians tend to generalize rape with other forms of torture during the war period, and deny the need for women's narratives of war to unfold in a specific space. The overall debate is regarding whether or not after all these years, it is necessary and practical to 'dig out' the forgotten narratives of rape. Finally, the economically downtrodden status of village women make them vulnerable to objectification even by the secular force, which without their consents collects and disseminates their experiences of sexual violation.

It is not only the nationalist narrative that can be charged with the allegation of objectifying women war victims, but the secular intervention under Jahanara Imam's initiative was equally problematic. Three women from the rural area of Kustia were brought to Dhaka to give testimonies at the people's court. These women were not explained adequately the concept behind the people's court, on the contrary, their pictures were taken and published in the newspaper without their permission.

As the disclosures of women's testimonies disrupt their social lives, it has become a moral debate among the historians whether or not disclosure is at all necessary. While feminist historians believe that, remembering the past is an integral and essential step towards reconciliation,²³ another group of historians believe that, disclosure of rape is not

²²Shaheen Akhter, Personal interview, 2005.

²³Sultana Kamal, Hameeda Hossain, Shaheen Akhter, Ferdousi Priyobhahshini, Suraiya Begum, Meghna Guhathakurata, Bina D'Costa have been actively advocating the importance of remembering women's

only unnecessary, but also troublesome for both the nation and its women.²⁴ Muntasir Mamoon, one of the most well known historians of Bangladesh says, “if I were to given a choice, I would not go further into it.” Afsan Chowdhury—a historian who has been working with the history of *Muktijuddho* for the past twenty five years is highly disturbed by the revisiting of *Birangonas*. For him, forgetting is just as important as remembering. In some cases we need to forget, and the *Birangona* case is one such. He flips his position with the feminist historians and emphasizes on women’s right to privacy and the right to remain silent,

From our journey of over 25 years, I would say we do not need to collect anymore. And we have no obligation or responsibility to do so either. Many women do not want to tell and we are creating pressure in this sector which is unfair. There has to be space for disclosure and space for withholding as well. It seems the State does not want to recognize this right to privacy on a matter which is the both very private and painful.²⁵ It is clear that social ostracism against women who have disclosed their narratives has created an uncomfortable atmosphere where it seems practical to remain silent. Dr. Nilima Ibrahim—a rehabilitation worker and feminist activist mentioned in the preface of her fictional testimony ‘*Ami Birangona Bolchi*’ of ‘This is *Birangona* Speaking’ that, she has lost interest in writing the third volume because of the growing protective nature of religious nationalism towards women, “today’s society will even call them sinners, this is why, twenty five years ago those who were deprived of normal lives, today, do not deserve to go through further social ostracism” (Ibrahim 1998, Preface). Until her death in June 2002, Nilima Ibrahim refused to talk about the *Birangona* issue altogether.

However, there is a small group of women who are interested in speaking about their experiences of rape or at least to begin the process of building a space where safe disclosure would be ultimately possible. As in recent years feminist scholars in India have initiated discussions on the use of violence in partition and the gendered aspect of constructing the nation-state, this approach has influenced scholar-activists in Bangladesh to think in the same direction. In fact, *Ain O Shalish Kendra*’s work is directly influenced by the “scholar-activist circle in India that spread to Bangladesh and Pakistan” (D’Costa 2005, 241). This process has at least initiated a theoretical platform to examine the phenomenon of rape and the gendered politics of nation building. There is also a small group of women who are willing to share their memories of war in a “woman friendly environment sensitive to their traditional and cultural restrictions” (D’ Costa 2005, 236). The space for disclosure needs to be gender sensitive and careful of women’s need for privacy. The narratives of rape could only be disclosed in a dialogue among women over a long period of time. For example, it took Shaheen Akhter three years of dialogue with survivor Ferdousi Priyobhadhini to write her oral testimony published in ‘*Narir Ektattor*’ or Women’s 1971 published by *Ain O Shalish Kendra*. Finally and most importantly, as

experiences of rape not only to recognize and incorporate them in the national history, but also to bring an emotional closure for the survivors.

²⁴ In the course of my work I interviewed three prominent historians of *Muktijuddho*. Dr. Sukumar Biswas (the director of Liberation War Research Institute), Dr. Muntasir Mamoon (Professor, Department of History, Dhaka University), and Afsan Chowdhury (the most reputed man in collecting and compiling oral history of *Muktijuddho*). All these historians expressed their opinion in favor of not disclosing women’s experiences of sexual violence from 1971.

²⁵ Questionnaire filled out by Afsan Chowdhury, 2005.

survivor Ferdousi Priyobhashini pointed out, it is women who need to come forward in networking, organizing in completing this task.

Ferdousi Priyobhashini: Rescuing History...Unleashing Terror:

“...saying was done, but a lot remain unsaid, because when I say and you write, a lot will be left out, a lot things...gap...gap...gap, because how much can I say? A human being can hold a thousand years in his thought, it is so quick! When one talks, when it comes out, then it becomes limited.”

--Ferdousi Priyobhashini (Personal Interview 2005)

It is a challenging process to come in terms with violence as extreme as rape during war time, especially in the cultural context of Bangladesh where the after math of rape is often more extreme than rape itself. Even though bringing the war criminals to justice is one step towards coming in terms with the violence inflicted upon these women, the emotional solution lies in remembering. Especially, in contemporary Bangladesh where the history of *Birangonas* is systematically being erased, it is necessary to reaffirm these women in the national history. It is this purpose of including these women in the history that motivated Ferdousi Priyobhashini to speak up in the first place, “I saw that the history of *Muktijuddho* was being altered and the torture of women were being forgotten, and then I saw rural women coming from the villages to be witnesses at the public court. I decided from the civil society I will speak up.”²⁶ Ferdousi Priyobhashini is the only middle class woman who willingly gives interviews and speaks about her experiences. She feels she is part of a historical continuum and it is her responsibility to speak up when history is re-altered to exclude women. The recent visit of Sarmila Bose to Bangladesh and her statement in ‘Anatomy of Violence: An Analysis of Civil War in East Pakistan in 1971’, “in all of the incidents involving the Pakistan army in the case-studies,” has driven the urgency of the *Birangona* situation one step further.

The disclosure of women’s experiences of rape from the past is also important because it broadens the scopes for contemporary women’s social and cultural privileges by considerably altering the notion of respectable womanhood. Ferdousi Priyobhashini in her interview, links the violence inflicted on her to the violence against women in present day Bangladesh, and in the lives of women she has encountered throughout her life. It is her belief that when she speaks of her experiences, she creates a rupture in the hegemonic national narrative, thus opening up a space for other women’s voices to unfold, “if I speak of my experiences, a space will open up, women will learn how to fight.”²⁷

The importance of speaking as a step towards healing is emphasized by Priyobhashini. She spoke of her experience at Tokyo Tribunal as rewarding as she was able to meet women from other parts of the world who shared similar memories of violence. She spoke of a ninety year old woman from Korea who danced at the last dinner party as she felt happy and relived. After all, it is breaking the silence and speaking up, which is the essential first step towards recognizing, honoring, and coming in terms with the mass rape of women during war time,

I remember she was very happy after delivering her testimony that, she danced. She became very happy after speaking, she said, ‘you, me, we are the same, our pain is the same.’ The world today is moving towards a higher civilization, no matter how many

²⁶ Personal Interview: Ferdousi Priyobhashini, 2005.

²⁷ Personal Interview: Ferdousi Priyobhashini, 2005.

bombs are blasting, still good people are out there, our history needs to be recorded and we women should take the initiative.²⁸

²⁸ Personal Interview: Ferdousi Priyobhashini, 2005.

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