

Volume 24
Number 2
Year 2022
ISSN 1529-0905 (Print)
2771-5086 (Digital)



Journal of BANGLADESH STUDIES



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Ethical Encounters: Women, War, and Cinema in Bangladesh

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A modern remake of Ajoy Kar's 1961 film *Saptapadi*, Shameen Akhtar's film *Rina Brown* (2017) unfolds intimate geographies of love and loss among individuals from India, and West and East Pakistan. One of few independent women filmmakers in Bangladesh, Akhtar offers a tale about unfulfilled dreams of love and freedom, setting her story in contemporary Bangladesh (or, Dhaka City) to trace the return of Rina, an Anglo-Christian, to the now-independent nation that she left during the turbulence of the Bangladesh Liberation War (*Muktijuddho*). It is decades later, and Rina comes back to participate in a seminar about women in conflict. Yet forty years after the war's end, she seeks out her adolescent love, Darashiko, a Bengali Muslim freedom-fighter-turned-business-executive. Over the course of a long afternoon, the two reminisce about the fading aspirations of the nationalist struggle and its unreconciled trauma.

Though Rina's past is indelibly linked to the history of Bangladesh, she is now a stranger whose suffering is incomprehensible to the post-war generation. As the couple look out on the sweeping urban landscape of Dhaka City, and think about what could have been, a vacant footbridge bereft of pedestrians serves as a metaphor to all that the war has torn asunder and imaginary borders, intractably entrenched. War changed everything, yet as Darashiko expresses forlornly, "We could not change the country."

I begin with this vignette from Akhtar's film – a woman-centered *Muktijuddho* film – because it highlights what the essays in *Ethical Encounters* strive to do: reimagine a *Muktijuddho* gender ideology through visual culture that engages with, disrupts, and incites a new imaginary for gender justice. The collection defies conventional readings of the aesthetics and politics of *Muktijuddho* narratives. They tell stories of the birth of a nation from its margins, grappling with the formation of a "Bangladeshi" identity that embraces Bengali Muslims, as well as non-Muslims and non-Bengalis, coalescing into a national cinema that crystallizes an emergent Bangladeshi modernity. Yet at the same time, this modernity also relies on a middle-class and masculinist reading of the nation and its history. *Ethical Encounter*, inspired by women-centric cinema in Bangladesh, illuminates a *feminine* aesthetic as well as a politics of disruption and agency, healing, and reconciliation.

In a study mapping a comprehensive log of Liberation War films, Kaberi Gayen (2013) looks at twenty-six full-length and seven key telefilms and categorizes them into three camps: films that are set pre-war, during war, and post-war. She further categorizes the films by each decade following national independence as well as by industrial versus alternative film. She draws on alternative filmmaker Catherine Masud's definition of "national cinema" and its quality as an authentic reflection of a country's tradition, society, history, and culture, in all its diversity and richness. Gayen further studies these films in both world cinema and Bangladesh national cinema contexts and shows that in pre-war films, with few exceptions, women appear in marginal, fragmented, or supporting roles. Even though post-independence films have featured women more centrally, their representational range is limited. In broad strokes, the abject sexual victimization of women in the Liberation War, leading to loss of life (suicide or otherwise) and harm to mental stability appear to set the stage for most mainstream and even some alternative war cinema.

Contrary to such categorical representation of women and war, a lesser told story of women's diverse participation in 1971 is the subject of Tareque and Catherine Masud's important short film, *Narir Kotha (Women and War 2000)*. The attention to diverse women's myriad roles in war is highlighted in the film through interviews with Ferdousi Priyobhashini, sculptor, and the first survivor to speak publicly of her experiences of rape and torture in 1971; Sritirekha Biswas who was twelve years old in 1971 and among the millions who crossed over to India as refugees; Mazlibala, an indigenous woman, who speaks of her community fighting the Pakistani Army with bows and arrows, as well as men and women from Choto Paitkandi village who also took part in guerilla resistance against the Pakistani Army. The attention to intersectionality in the film disrupts the Bengali and Muslim as well as masculinist hegemonic representational politics of contemporary Bangladeshi cinema about 1971. The picture that emerges in this film is that of a peoples' war fought across class, gender, religious, and ethnic lines and in various roles by the people

of then East Pakistan. Importantly, the film raises two critical points especially relevant for representation of women and violence: one raised by Mazlibala when she poses the question, “Is it just a matter of physical ‘dishonor’?” when recounting the trauma of 1971; and another by Priyobhashini commenting on the continuing and multi-faceted violence against women, “The situation has not really changed, even today in 1999. Rather all over the world, killing and rape of women has increased.” She reads off the headlines in the Bengali language daily *Ittefaq*, “Refugee Exodus: Kosovo to Become Empty Wasteland.” Broadening the relegation of women’s roles to sexual victimization, and locating the Bengali struggle for self-determination within a global, transcultural, and transhistorical context of conflict and gender violence, Masuds’ film – indeed, filmography of this leading filmmaking duo in Bangladeshi nationalist cinema, as *Narir Kotha* is part of a trilogy along with *Muktir Gaan (Songs of Freedom 1995)* and *Muktir Kotha (Words of Freedom 1999)* – opens up significant questions to grapple with regarding the past and continuing encounters between war, women, and cinema. Following the provocation in Masuds’ filmography, in this piece, I invite readers on a journey through Bangladeshi national cinema and its contestations over gender by highlighting three moments in its trajectory.

As Bangladesh emerged in the global imaginary as a deficient, war and disaster-ridden nation, leftist revolutionary writer and activist Zahir Raihan was already an acclaimed filmmaker, having made the classic nationalist satire *Jibon Theke Neya* (Glimpses of Life) in 1970 and *Behula* in 1966. In 1971, as the war raged, the provisional government asked Raihan to make a series of documentaries about the erupting struggle in South Asia—one the global community knew very little about. These documentaries were to raise consciousness and spur international intervention. Raihan was already at work on *Stop Genocide* (1971), which documented the terrible violence of the war as it was unfolding, utilizing sparse technical and financial resources. *Stop Genocide* put the Bengali struggle for self-determination within a global context of anti-colonialism and anti-imperialism, including critiques of the United States in aiding West Pakistan and of the United Nations for its failure to protect human rights in the region. Archiving this traumatic history meant bringing to light little-known, disappeared stories, thereby reclaiming particular memories from the vantage point of the marginalized, and those made invisible. The result was the first significant moment in the trajectory of Bangladeshi national cinema as four critical documentaries – *Stop Genocide*, *Liberation Fighters*, *A State Is Born*, and *Innocent Millions*—aspired to educate through film and deploy the camera as an emancipatory tool. These films strove to capture the war as it was experienced by the “people of Bangladesh,” authenticated by filmmakers who were themselves freedom fighters.

The second moment saw the release of four full-length feature films within months of the war’s end, including the iconic *Ora Egaro Jon* (1972) directed by Chashi Nazrul Islam, in which real-life freedom fighters played the leading revolutionary roles, continuing that earlier trend. At the same time, however, the films canonized 1971 as encapsulated by key motifs – mass murder, rape, arson, and the righteous guerrilla insurgence – that, over time, concretized as tropes. Yet these documentaries set the context and ideal for a *Muktijuddho* gender ideology for a subsequent generation of films – the third significant moment – notably crystallized in the award-winning film, *Guerrilla* (2011), directed by Nasiruddin Yousuff, a freedom fighter, that introduced the first commercial film centering a woman combatant. Curiously, while highlighting women’s roles in the Liberation War – even centering them – the film nevertheless ends with Bilkis Banu’s (played by Jaya Ahsan) self-annihilation by which she earns the honorific, “martyr.” Bilkis Banu personifies a composite of bereaved wife, dutiful daughter-in-law, loving sister, insurgent, and revolutionary as she blows up both herself and the Pakistani Army office—an ultimate sacrifice for her and, by proxy, the nation’s honor.

So, in what ways have women filmmakers disrupted the gendered ideology of glorious war, masculine heroism, and feminized shame and sacrifice? Shameem Akhtar, part of a film movement shepherded by Alamgir Kabir, and alongside Tareque Masud and others, created the neorealist trilogy *Daughters of History* (2000), *Shilalipi* (2004), and *Rina Brown* (2017) as a call for justice, employing a lens that foregrounded intimate histories, empathy, and friendship with the “Other”. The first of the three, *Daughters of History*, is set amid the ruins of the devastating Liberation War and follows a dissident friendship between women across borders whose pasts are intimately intertwined, caught within an encounter between oppressor-oppressed nations. Lalarukh (played by Sara Zaker), a Pakistani researcher working on documenting war crimes that the Pakistani military committed on Bengalis in 1971, and Monika (played by Rahnuma Ahmed), her Bengali activist-friend whose family survived the violence, both experience transformations of consciousness through their interlaced struggles. As a Pakistani, Lalarukh bears the burden of the genocide that her own government and military forces unleashed on the Bengali population. Yet she finds herself conflicted. Born in East Pakistan, she is empathetic toward the Bengalis affected by the war, particularly her childhood friend Monika. Yet she must also make sense of the silence and sanctioned ignorance of her own family, including her Bengali mother, during the war. Monika’s and Lalarukh’s parallel trajectories form the premise of a

dissident alliance, as they embark on a journey of healing and reconciliation with a war-child Ananya (played by Nasrin Siraj).

Extending beyond this trilogy, feminist filmmaker Rubaiyat Hossain's first film, *Meherjaan* (2011), broadens the scope of remembering 1971 through the intertwined history of the region, with cast members and musical score featuring artists spanning India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. The stunning visual landscape feels dissonant in the war film genre, but *Meherjaan* also centers ethical encounters with the "Other", whether through Bengali-Pakistani romance, same-sex desire, or a war-child returning in search of her past to reunite with a family member. The film confronts cherished truths about femininity and masculinity during wartime, interrogating the sacrosanct space that memorialization practices have ritualized. Reckoning with past trauma, healing and reconciliation begin with women's interpersonal encounters.

The attempt to memorialize women's varied experiences in the Liberation War is a way to advocate for and write their complex, agential roles into the national history. Instead of primarily focusing on state-level negotiations or masculine combat, films in this genre highlight the intimate, domestic, or "feminine" sphere as the site of struggle and meaning. Building on Hossain's notion of a feminine revisiting of the war, by a "feminine" sphere, I mean those spaces that are usually considered feminized – and thus subordinated – within dominant patriarchal ideology. However, reframed, they can also be read as portrayals of nonconformity, mutuality, and solidarity. By allowing the viewer to remember, imagine, and work through traumatic events such as war and conflict through a feminine aesthetic, cinema can help us to appreciate the moral choices and interpretive acts of women, previously consigned to only the "feminine" sphere, cast as passive victims or witnesses. Women in these films instead make unexpected, sometimes jarring choices: nursing a wounded enemy soldier; seeking the assistance of a sympathetic Pakistani soldier after having been raped by others like him; and embracing a child of rape even when the nation rejects them. Recognizing these moral choices is a legacy of the war that viewers learn to appreciate through the cinematic medium, and these films are an evolving archive where diverse women's stories are memorialized, as significant and precious as the memorials and museums the state erects to commemorate martyrs.

Moving to Hossain's subsequent films, *Under Construction* (2015) and *Made in Bangladesh* (2019), these also shift the terrain of masculinist filmmaking practices on a number of fronts, not the least of which is her use of a diverse cast and a production crew of mostly women. With regard to the representations of women at the crossroads of gender, class, and neoliberal development in the context of urban Bangladesh, these films highlight the city and explore how gender and sexuality are central to the formation of a public modernity. Both spotlight the daily negotiations women – namely the garment workers of Bangladesh – make in relation to domestic, factory, and public arenas, focusing on the new kinds of encounters and subjectivities enabled by these hostile yet agentic encounters. Breaking from mainstream cinema in terms of form, content, and complexity, Hossain's work is significant in the way she de-romanticizes war masculinity and femininity but also, in this new cinematic context, centers the women's journey from the village to the city, from worker to activist yet not as a seamless transition to empowered subjects. She counters a victim discourse in favor of a woman's lived experience that challenges the heteropatriarchal reduction of women to only their reproductive and sexed bodies. Hossain's filmography boldly centers a feminist dissidence that reflects the organizing principles, language, and contemporary movement-organizing of an urban context. Recent feminist campaigns have demanded attention to women's freedom as opposed to patriarchal protection, and such narratives speak to the complexities reflected in the female characters' sexual expressivity in these films. Viewers witness the liminality of war and liberation, the traditional and the modern, women living within and through the clash between conflicting worlds, as Hossain skillfully layers meaning to characters such as a war heroine (*Birangona*), a war child (*Juddhoshishu*), the migrant worker, the NGO professional, the human rights activist, and middle class women aspiring for emancipation – lovers and mothers – all of them scattered along the contested terrain of a gendered spectrum that embodies the new woman of Bangladesh.

Meanwhile, a host of documentaries about Bangladesh's Liberation War, also made by women filmmakers, namely, *The Poison Thorn* (Farzana Boby, 2015), *Rising Silence* (Leesa Gazi, 2019), *Born Together* (Shabnam Ferdousi, 2016), and *A Certain Liberation* (Yasmine Kabir, 2003), showcase the aspirational justice process with regard to survivors of the violence of 1971. These films redefine what humanity, loss, and justice mean for victims, and reconfigure relationships between viewer, witness, and ally. The human rights and NGO-based activist instrumental summoning of victims' testimonials are juxtaposed to community- and kinship-based reciprocal care of victims as well as the plight of war children who are in search of their roots and recognition. These point to the open wound that 1971 still is, especially for women. This foundational trauma remains constitutive of the nation, and *Muktijuddho* cinema plays a pivotal role in constructing – and disrupting – the gendered subjectivities begat by the war's legacy. Women's cinema, and human rights cinema, capture more broad, transnational visions of feminist

filmmaking. They recast the relationships of women to war – as plunder of nation, as dislodged women from that nation – and question the terms of what constitutes the human in these fraught circumstances.

Ultimately, women-centric *Muktijuddho* films employ global human rights narratives and aesthetics that defy reductive and monolithic renditions of social reality. They offer complexity and nuance beyond just a tussle between victims and aggressors, loss and triumph, and colonization and liberation. Simultaneously, they strive for more ethical recognitions, drawing on a multiplicity of histories, struggles, and experiences. Woman-centered films provide an alternative reading toward decolonizing notions of agency, freedom, justice; they imagine a new kind of feminist knowledge-making.

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