

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



Journal of BANGLADESH STUDIES



CONTENTS

CONTENTS	iv
From The Editor	
Farida Chowdhury Khan	v
Addressing Labor Productivity for the Sustainability of the Garment Industry in Bangladesh	
Shahidur Rahman, Sabrina Fatema Chowdhury	1
Fintech as a Positive Enabler During COVID-19 in Bangladesh	
Nova Ahmed, Anik Saha, Md. Sabbir Ahmed, Ifti Azad, Anik Sinha, Rahat Jahangir Rony, Syeda Shabnam Khan, Shajnunsh Amir, Tanvir Hasan, Gazi Fakhrul Islam	16
Bangladesh-Bhutan Preferential Trade Agreement: WTO Compliance and Implications for LDC Graduation	
Shahriar Bin Wares	25
Ethical Encounters: Women, War, and Cinema in Bangladesh	
Elora Halim Chowdhury.....	37
Book Reviews	
<i>Sisters in the Mirror: A History of Muslim Women and the Global Politics of Feminism</i>	
Nusrat Chowdhury	42
<i>Ethical Encounters: Transnational Feminism, Human Rights, and War Cinema in Bangladesh</i>	
Firdous Azim.....	44
<i>The Odds Revisited: Political Economy of Development in Bangladesh</i>	
Haider A. Khan	47
<i>My Brac Life: The Becoming of a Development Activist</i>	
Mustafizur Rahman.....	50

Book Review

Ethical Encounters: Transnational Feminism, Human Rights, and War Cinema in Bangladesh

Elora Halim Chowdhury

Review by: Firdous Azim

BRAC University

Email: fazim@bracu.ac.bd

This book traces the complexities of a standard gendered narrative of nation-making. Focusing on war films, or *Muktijuddho* movies, a genre that the author claims pervades the filmic narratives in Bangladesh, Elora Halim Chowdhury, Professor of Gender and Women's Studies at University of Massachusetts, Boston, traces through the efforts of alternative, and mainly female filmmakers, the ways in which such stories are reframed to question the mainstream portrayal of the "glorious" birth of the nation. These films shake the dominant trope and add, as historian Van Schendel indicates, "nuance" to it. The author quotes Bina D'Costa, and claims that the "nationalist and masculinist identity" that pervades all recounting are tested and unsettled.

The figure of the *birangona* has remained elusive and difficult to pin down. The then home minister Mr. Kamruzzaman gave this title to women who were raped in the 1971 war of liberation. The appellation was meant to bestow women with the honor and glory attached to the title of *bir muktijuddha* or "brave warriors" given to male guerilla fighters. But alas, such honor and glory were not enjoyed by the women, who were either ostracized by their family and community or preferred to hide themselves within the folds of other identities.

In fact, it is only in the last few decades that the figure of the *birangona* has begun to emerge in artistic portrayals, in film, fiction, research, and documentary, and it is in this context that the publication of this book is welcome. The context is further widened through the transnational lens mentioned in the title, and the theoretical connections made between African American women recounting stories of slavery and emancipation, or the Palestinian struggle against conquest and domination connects these very local efforts to the struggles of women worldwide and seeks a theoretical frame within which to place it. In fact, the films are made to circulate in several contexts, as they disturb the dominant national narrative, making them part of the transnational feminist questioning of women's position and portrayal.

Chowdhury also traces what she calls human rights cinema, that is, filmic representations that bring in ethical considerations, with the aim of correcting previous representations. These films, while set in a nationalist frame, recounting the story of the birth of the nation, consciously examine the ways in which the nation treats its people, with an emphasis on women's positioning.

The book carefully draws a lineage for this form of woman-centered or *birangona* centered films. Starting with a wonderful vignette from the author's memory of how in her middle-class academically oriented home, holiday film viewing on TV meant that all activities stopped while Bangladesh Television or BTV (the sole TV channel) aired various films – *Ora Egaro Jon* for example. This provides the background for the films under review. Tracing the history of *Muktijuddho* cinema from 1972 (and even earlier in films of struggle and life) two filmmakers stand out: Zahir Raihan and Alamgir Kabir. However, the *Muktijuddho* films in Bangladesh can be characterized by the "absent-present woman" (p. 36). It is only when we come to the 2000s, that a group of filmmakers, both in documentary and feature films, focus on the figure of the woman and usher in a new nuanced portrayal of the *Muktijuddho*. Among the feature films – three take center stage, *Itihash Konna* (2000, dir. Shameem Akhtar), *Meherjan* (2011, dir. Rubaiyat Hossain), and *Guerilla* (2011, dir. Nasiruddin Yousuff). Documentaries such as *Rising Silence* (2019, dir. Leesa Gazi), *Bish Kanta (The Poison Thorn)*, 2015, dir. Farzana Boby), and *Shadhinota (A Certain Liberation)*, 2003, dir. Yasmine Kabir) are discussed to bring in the way the women filmmakers draw aside the curtain that has hidden this figure.

The *birangona* as a subject of filmic representations thus comes into being about 30 years after independence. The hitherto masculinist discourse is questioned and examined, and in doing so, the easy celebration of independence is brought under fresh purview. This is the same period that saw the publication of major works on the *birangona*, including fiction and research. As the *birangona* emerges into view, issues of rights and justice also rise to the fore. How has the victim/survivor of women raped during the war been understood and treated? What does justice mean to these women? Who are the perpetrators of the violence that these women have been subjected to? Easy answers are unavailable. Instead, the book draws attention to the reception to two films which were released around the same time in 2011: Rubaiyat Hossain's *Meherjan* and Nasiruddin Yousuf's *Guerilla*. The former film has a rather checkered history, portraying a love affair between a young Bengali girl and a runaway Pakistani soldier. Even though the soldier figure is shown to be a Baluch – fellow sufferers under the Pakistanis – who had deserted his battalion because he could not participate in the war crimes, the mainstream narrative represented by the government as well as the host of reviews and interviews regarding the film, considered this story unacceptable. Furthermore, it is alleged that the *birangona* in Hossain's portrayal is shown as an inglorious figure, mentally unbalanced, and making accusations against her fellow activists in the pre-liberation days. Any interaction between a Pakistani soldier and a Bengali person had to be portrayed as violent, and a friendship, let alone a romance between them, was difficult to stomach.

On the other hand, *Guerilla*, which was widely acclaimed and won many awards, portrays a woman soldier taking up arms. However even in this highly acclaimed film, the *birangona* hardly emerges as a heroic figure, and the lead figure is shown to choose death over being captured by Pakistani soldiers. The questions that arise time and again regarding the portrayal of the *birangona* are - how is she integrated into family, society, and nation? So where is the glory of the nation if it cannot render justice to its own suffering people?

The films under review – *Meherjan*, *Guerilla* or *Itishash Konna* – struggle with portraying a *birangona*. She remains, as Chowdhury claims, a “ghostly presence”, and hovers in the sidelines, either as a person who has already departed the scene, or as a ghastly fate that awaited women in the time of war, or as a mad presence. She is both inside and outside the story, hardly coming to the fore to speak her mind. Giving voice and presence to the *birangona* is a persistent problem that all representations have had to grapple with. An interesting way in which the impossibility of representation has been approached is through an inter-generational lens employed in *Meherjan* and *Itishash Konna*.

The inter-generational lens, or a looking back is what brings us to the documentaries under review. The documentaries – *Rising Silence* or *Jonom Shathi (Born Together, 2016, dir. Shabnam Ferdousi)* places the filmmaker at the center of the narrative as the film traces the process by which a new generation of women connect the story of *birangonas* with their own lives. Even when the film text does not foreground the persona of the filmmaker, as in *Bish Kanta*, interviews with Farzana Boby, the filmmaker, reveal her total immersion into the lives of the women portrayed. Virginia Woolf had once said that we think through our mothers, if we are women. These stories are cast in the role of women of the nation delving into the lives of our mothers to create an alternative history of the nation.

The epilogue examines Yasmine Kabir's documentary *Shadhinota*. This film follows Gurudasi as she walks the streets of her town with a stick. Her family had been slaughtered during the war, and she herself had been rescued by *muktijoddhas* from an army camp after the liberation of the country. A survivor of extreme tragedy and violence, Gurudasi could easily be dismissed as a mad woman. Instead, she is accepted by all, young and old, and in her community, she is embraced as the universal mother. The title is rendered in English as *A Certain Liberation*, and Gurudasi's ambiguous presence is indeed the most telling representation of the unrepresentable *birangona*.

These films, and this book, will speak to many, and especially to women, in Bangladesh and beyond. As most research on *birangonas* or victims of war rape show, (Mookherjee (2015), Saikia (2011), or fictional renderings such as Shaheen Akhtar's *Talaash*, 2005), justice remains an elusive word. This book spoke specially to me as I am part of Naripokkho's involvement with *birangonas*. The program entitled “The Forgotten Women of 1971” has brought us into contact with many women who have suffered and survived untold sufferings since the 1971 war of independence. These women are now in the twilight of their lives, yet their struggles for food, health care, or adequate shelter continue. The neglect they have suffered from the nation, as well as their families, persists.

This book, and these films, reminds us that justice has many facets, that it goes beyond punishing the perpetrators, and that sadly some wrongs cannot be righted, and some “rights” (in both senses of the word) were not pursued.

References

Mookherjee, N. (2015). The raped woman as a horrific sublime and the Bangladesh war of 1971. *Journal of Material Culture*, 20(4), 379–395.

Saikia, Y. (2011). Women, war, and the making of Bangladesh. In *Women, War, and the Making of Bangladesh*. Duke University Press.