Fragmented Memory, Incomplete History:
Women and Nation in War Films of Bangladesh

Fahmida Akhter

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Department of Literature, Film, and Theatre Studies

University of Essex

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ABSTRACT

The most important and celebrated chapter in the history of Bangladesh is its nine-month long Liberation War (*Muktijuddho* in Bengali) of 1971. My research explores the ways in which memories and histories of the war are shaped by the gender dynamics of nationalism in different periods through examining war-themed films of Bangladesh. By covering both mainstream and alternative war films produced just before, during and after the war, from 1970 to 2011, I trace the various ways in which men and women are represented in war films and construct the idea of nation. I also aim to unpack the politics and aesthetics of war films, contextualizing them as they intersect with the socio-historical contexts. Employing textual and visual analyses with using solid theoretical scholarship, both from the East and the West, concerning cinematic representation of the past, women and nation, I argue that the different power structures of men and women constructed in war films are in accordance with the dominant ideology of the society.

The Liberation War was a people's war, involving manifold participation of both men and women from different classes, religions and localities. Despite this reality, cinematic representations of the War have always portrayed the combat experience as an exclusively masculine enterprise. By contrast, women have been constructed in the films as passive victims or in subordinate roles. Woman is valorized in one instance, in her idealized portrayal as the 'mother-nation'; this iconic projection of woman, however, highlights men's heroic defence of their motherland. On the other hand, female rape victims in the war are framed as shame or dishonour for the nation and are offered a customary exclusion by suicide, death or occasionally by some other means at the end of the war films. I have argued that war films exclude the raped women from the narratives in order to maintain a perceived purity of the nationalist discourse, following the national politics, culture and historiography of Bangladesh.

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INTRODUCTION

Prologue

In January 2011, the film *Meherjaan* (2011), centering on a love affair between a Bangladeshi woman and a Pakistani soldier during the Liberation War of Bangladesh, was withdrawn from cinema theaters across Bangladesh, just a week after its release. The distributor had to withdraw the film as it triggered fierce criticism and heated debate in different media. Many cultural commentators criticized *Meherjaan* for its misrepresentation of the history of the Liberation War of 1971 (Ethirajan 2011: n.p.). This is the war (*Muktijudhdho* in Bengali)*,* through which Bangladesh became an independent nation-state by breaking away from Pakistan. Bangladesh was formerly known as East Bengal and then East Pakistan until it finally became Bangladesh in 1971.[1] Critics said that the love story between a Bengali woman and a Pakistani soldier, portrayed in *Meherjaan*, evoked sympathetic feelings towards the Pakistani soldier, diluting the viciousness of the Pakistani armies and the brutality of the genocide committed by them. The film also casts a shadow over the commonly held heroic image of the *Muktijodhdha*s (Bengali freedom fighters) which has always been linked to steadfast and active defence of the motherland during the war. In *Meherjaan*, *Muktijodhdha*s are perplexed, apathetic and fatigued.

The portrayal of the *Birangona* (war heroine) was also condemned as unfamiliar (Ferdous, Babu, Gayen and Priyobhashini 2011: n.p.).[2] Media images always portray rape victims as silenced, helpless, and as a symbol of 'shame' (Figure 1.1). By contrast, in

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[1] During the British period, when the British ruled the undivided India, Bangladesh, as part of India, was officially known as East Bengal. British colonial rule ended in India in 1947, followed by the partition of India and Pakistan and their emergence as two separate countries. Pakistan became the land of Muslims and East Bengal, with its Muslim majority population, joined Pakistan. It was then termed as East Pakistan in 1956 (See Van Schendel 2013: 183).

[2] Immediately after the Liberation War, the Bangladesh government declared the title *Birangona* for the rape victims and tortured women to acknowledge their sacrifice and contribution during the war.

Meherjaan, the rape victim character, Neela, is not ashamed, but rather voices her many desires (including sexual) that go beyond the social understanding of rape victims in contemporary Bangladesh. She also reveals that she has been raped brutally not only by the Pakistani soldiers, but also by a Bangladeshi student comrade before the war. The film thus challenges the common opinion about the Pakistani armies as unambiguously brutal by presenting a Bangladeshi male in the role of a rapist, committing a crime equivalent to the ones committed by the Pakistani armies.

Figure 1.1 The famous photo *Hair*, by Naibuddin Ahmed, directed the popular imagination to think about *Birangona*s as an invisible and shamed group.

Despite the fact that *Meherjaan* features the region's noted stars, Jaya Bachchan and Victor Banerjee from India, and other leading performers from Bangladesh and Pakistan, it could not avoid hostile responses from different groups of people, particularly those who play an influential role in writing the history of the Liberation War. The cultural elites were concerned that *Meherjaan* could mediate and bring complexities to the memory of 1971

(Ethirajan 2011: n.p.). They were especially concerned that it might influence the International Crimes Tribunal (ICT) set-up formed in 2009 by the Bangladeshi government. The aim of this domestic tribunal was to investigate and prosecute alleged local collaborators and war criminals who collaborated with the Pakistani armed forces and committed atrocities during the war. Besides this, officially, Pakistan has never apologized or admitted responsibility for the genocide that it has committed, involving the killings of approximately three million people and raping of two to three hundred thousand women of Bangladesh during that war.[3]

Rubaiyat Hossain, the director of *Meherjaan*, defended her approach emphasizing that the film offers the outlook of a 'counter-narrative' of the war through a female perspective (Mohaiemen 2011a: n.p.). The 'counter-narrative' of the history presented in *Meherjaan*, however, was rejected by some segments of the audience, as it was not consonant with the socio-political agenda, national interest and popular memories of the war. In particular, media images and varied sites of cultural transmission have, over the past four decades since the independence of Bangladesh, influenced and structured popular memories of the war. Through a process of exclusion and inclusion, the mechanism of the public memory maintained a selective process in which it fulfilled the institutional and group's desires. Thus the popular memories of the Liberation War are something that are 'selected to be remembered' (Neiger 2011: 4). The war has been a recurrent theme in Bangladeshi cultural and political discourses. With the Liberation War repeatedly established and reaffirmed as the originary, foundational site of the nation, it follows that those in a position to mediate what that war signified (or, to make that war signify) have a considerable say in

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[3] It is difficult to establish accurately the number of dead people and raped women in the Liberation War. In the official accounts of Bangladesh and Pakistan, these figures vary greatly (Van Schendel 2009: 173). The range of the figures cited here are quoted from Jahan (1997: 291); Mookherjee (2003: 160); and D'Costa (2011: 19).

what it means to be Bangladeshi. The withdrawal of *Meherjaan* therefore further testifies to the fact that voices articulating a woman's perspective, as well as being excluded from contributing to the public memory of the Liberation War (as this is articulated in popular culture and cinema), remain unwelcome in such wider discussion of nationhood and national identity in contemporary Bangladesh.

My research investigates the ways in which memories and histories of the Liberation War are shaped by the gender dynamics of nationalism in different periods through examining war films of Bangladesh. By the term 'war films of Bangladesh', I suggest those Bangladeshi films that deal with the theme and history of the Liberation War. By covering both mainstream and alternative war films produced just before, during and after the war, from 1970 to 2011, I trace the intersections between gender and nation that occurred in war films. I intend to explore gender differences and the various ways in which men and women are represented in war films and construct the idea of nation. Also central to this project are the twists and turns of social, cultural and political events in different eras and their constantly shifting influences in war films in structuring new national projects and the dominant memory of the war. The concept of nationalism in Bangladesh has been revised several times in accordance with the ideology of the different governments headed by various political parties. Two major categories are evident in defining the idea of nationalism in Bangladesh: Bengali nationalism and Bangladeshi nationalism. Although, these terms differ from each other by the degree to which they include levels of Muslim identity and the secular notion of Bengali identity, in the formation of national identity, both of them convey the interest of the ruling elites of Bangladesh to secure their socio-political agenda. I shall discuss these concepts at more length in Chapter One and in subsequent chapters as they are also important factors for structuring the representation of nation in the war films of Bangladesh.

Claims

The main argument of this thesis is that the representations of women and nation in the war films of Bangladesh have been affected and shaped by the dynamics of national politics, culture and historiography that are mostly masculine-centered or male-driven. Both the official history and film recorded and projected a partial 'truth' of the Liberation War. Consequently, many real aspects of the Liberation War and women's experiences in the war have been marginalized or erased. By excluding women's actual experiences of the war, the cinematic memory and the history have created fragmented images of women in the war. Although, in many instances, 'woman' has been given great importance by her idealized depiction as mother to symbolize the nation, this importance, however, offers her little in the way of agency. It rather manifests the glorification of Bengali men's role in the war, who bravely fought and saved the mother-nation.

The Liberation War was a people's war. Rounaq Jahan, for example, argues that exploitation by West Pakistani rulers, both culturally and economically, compelled the Bengalis to a prolonged struggle for autonomy over nearly two decades (1997: 291-292). This struggle culminated in victory for the Bengalis in the nine-month-long Liberation War against the Pakistani army as a result of the participation of all levels of the populace of this land. India also provided support and assistance for the Bengalis in this war. However, civilians 'from all walks of life', regardless of gender, ethnicity, or religious affiliation, had made their contribution to the war effort (Parvin 2011: XI; Begum 2010: 33), except for those Bengalis or Bihari Muslims who collaborated with the Pakistani army. Asma Parvin provides statistics that among 120,000 freedom fighters who fought in the Liberation War, 3,000 were from the East Bengal Regiment, 10,000 were from the East Pakistan Regiment, 13,000 from the Police force and the rest 94,000 were composed of civilians (2011: 10). Women, who constitute half of the population of Bangladesh, were also within this range of

civilians. I admit that all women could not play the same role as men did, fighting in the front line of the war with arms and weapons, as the war was directed by men making it difficult for women to join roles as active as combatants. However, despite this reality, women took part in the war, directly and indirectly, on multiple levels. Some were in fact active on the battlefield such as, Taramon Bibi, Vagirothi, Rawshon Ara and many others; some helped the freedom fighters by giving them shelter, food and nursing; some had willingly sent their sons and husbands to the war. Many women were subjected to rape, torture and killings by the Pakistani soldiers and collaborators. Many lost their families, homes and livelihoods, and their suffering continued after the war ended.

The sixteen volumes of the *Bangladesher Shadhinota Judhdho Dolilpotro* (Liberation War of Bangladesh: Documents), published by the Ministry of Information of Bangladesh, includes a limited number of testimonies of wartime rape, within which information on women freedom fighters has hardly been recorded (Mohsin 2004: 20; Saikia 2011: 55; D'Costa et al. 2010: 335; Gayen 2015: 2). The official speeches and different narratives usually segregate men and women's contribution in the war by indicating again and again that independence was achieved by the supreme sacrifices of 30 million martyrs and that of 200,000 mothers and sisters who lost their *shambhram/izzat* (chastity) in the war. The phrase 'martyr' solely represents men. It is because of this that Barrister Sultana Kamal, a renowned woman human rights activist in Bangladesh, resentfully expresses that, 'When we recall the images of the 30 million martyrs of the Liberation War, there never once appears a woman's face in our memories' (Kamal 2001: 17).

The selective, gendered amnesia evident in official historical accounts and records further extends, this thesis claims, to the realm of cinema. Having failed to comprehend women's real experiences, suffering and contributions in the war, most war films have constructed women stereotypically in supportive and submissive roles, eliding their

subjectivities. Either they are figured as rape victims or as helpless mothers, sisters or wives of the heroes, providing a protective motivation for the heroes to fight. By contrast, most cinematic representations of the war portray the combat experience as an exclusively masculine enterprise, a life-and-death fight between Pakistani army and Bengali men. Thus the images of fighter women or women as agents of the war very quickly became diffused and disappeared. Women appear there mostly with the mantle of victimhood. In contrast, these films create the myth that only Bengali men fight and die for the nation.

Approaches

Although motion pictures bear witness and record memories, they can also alter and shape memories. Their impression is so 'authoritative, so real, that filmed subjects seemed to exist not as records of a point in time, but in the present projection' (Matsuda 1996: 166-167). Indeed film, with its audio-visual language, constitutes an actual story telling mode, and can dissolve the difference between the past and the present. Film thus profoundly dominates the collective memory by constantly shaping and reshaping our understanding of the past. My project deals with the cinematic contribution towards shaping the public and popular memory of the war, and its encounters with contemporary socio-political contexts. As Michel Foucault contends, '[a]ny discourse, whatever it be, is constituted by a set of utterances which are produced each in its place and time' (1979a: 19). Thus the Liberation War-based films, even after their dealings with the past, cannot be discussed without being positioned in the contemporaneous contexts within which they are produced.

I employ textual and visual analyses using solid theoretical scholarship, both from the East and the West, concerning cinematic representation of the past, women and nation. Exhaustive textual analysis is one of the main methods of my study. In this connection, I want to quote from Richard Dyer to explain how textual analysis locates the facts, both

within and beyond a film narrative, by connecting them with wider socio-political realities. Dyer argues that textual analysis, 'at best it seeks to show the way that the textual facts of a film itself, its narrative organization, its address to the viewer, its visual and aural rhetoric, construct, not necessarily coherently or without contradictions, a perception of social reality' (1998: 8). Thus textual analysis would help to locate the effects and dynamics of contemporary cultural and political viewpoints in structuring the representations of the past. Beside the textual analysis, I employ visual analytical methods to examine the composite language of cinema, consisting of editing, lighting, different compositions of shots, sounds and settings. This visual reading is to study the films' aesthetic and technical mechanisms that work as sign making systems. Thus, this research covers both the surface and hidden meanings produced by the war films of Bangladesh.

In addition, as war films deal with the identity and memory of the nation, the study of these films needs to employ the theories and studies relating to national cinema. Being a Bangladeshi, my reading of the war films of Bangladesh also involves my personal experiences and encounters with the socio-political realities of Bangladesh, as a woman who grew-up within that context. Although I did not experience the war, as I was born after several years following it, in my memory, I can picture the war. I draw this mainly from my understanding of the war that I gained through watching war films and my encounter with other war narratives. I would like to refer to this kind of personal memory about an event that one has not experienced directly with the term 'prosthetic memory' coined by Alison Landsberg. 'Prosthetic memory', as Landsberg argues, for a spectator is a 'sensuous engagement with the past' which is not authentic but derived from the mediated representations constructed by different cultural technologies and films (2003: 148-150). Indeed, prosthetic memories are 'personal', but not a sole possession of an individual. They rather create a perception of a public past.

At this point, I want to mention that my imagination of the war is also informed by the stories that I heard from my mother, Mahmuda Akhter, and from other relatives who experienced the war directly. My mother's accounts are mostly associated with events concerning how she escaped from Dhaka, the capital city of present Bangladesh, on 26 March 1971, immediately after the Pakistani military cracked down in Dhaka at midnight on 25 March. Protecting her one-month-old son (my elder brother, Gazi Mahfuzur Rahman) and being accompanied by my father, Mohammad Mustafizur Rahman, and other relatives, she journeyed to our village from Dhaka by walking and by using different forms of transport. They had to break their expedition several times due to the state of emergency in force over those days. I also heard from my father about the thrilling episode of my younger uncle, Mahbubur Rahman, who joined the *Mukti Bahini* (Bengali Liberation Army) and how local collaborators were coming every now and then to my grand parent's home in the village to find out my uncle's whereabouts.[4] However, I never heard any stories about any women of our relatives that were raped during the war. This is the singular subject about which I noticed my parents' and relatives' silence or avoidance. As rape in general is a taboo subject in Bangladesh, about which any discussion is considered dishonorable, there is no way of knowing what the absence of my family narratives on the subject signifies. No families would disclose incidences of rape that happened to their women. So, since my childhood, my learning about raped women in the war, which has been developed mostly from different books and films, generated a question mark in my mind: who are those 200,000 raped women? I found nobody in my family, or in my friends' families, or anybody else's, that I spoke to, read of, or heard about, who would admit to being raped in the war, although

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[4] *Mukti Babini* was a Bengali militia formed during the war. This group consisted of Bangladesh military, paramilitary and civilians. Members of *Mukti Bahini* were trained and supported by India. They fought bravely against the Pakistani forces and local collaborators who helped the Pakistani armies during the war.

recently this has begun to change.[5] Slowly, I have constructed images of raped women in my imagination resulting from the references I have received from films and other cultural transmission. These images have become my 'prosthetic memory'. My prosthetic memory is also a part of the broader collective memory of Bangladeshis. However, I am aware that as a researcher I need to remain objective and should distance myself a little/somewhat from the empathetic approach of the 'prosthetic memory'. I bring this term here to point out the mechanism of film as a memory making apparatus.

This project aims to investigate the status and the purpose of cinematic memory concerning women and nation in the context of the Liberation War. In addition, this study aspires to probe power relations, hidden agenda and the implicit ideology in the languages of war films, and in the history making process of Bangladesh. While analyzing the war films, this research also reviews Bangladeshi culture, as Bangladeshi culture is the site from which different norms, particularly the dominant ideology, gain shape and seek to regulate understandings of various matters. Consequently, my research can be seen as a close cultural study of the war films and the national politics of Bangladesh through the eyes of a Bangladeshi feminist.

Why war, why women and why nation?

Issues concerning 'women in war', 'women and war' or 'women, war and nationalism' have started to draw academic critical attention over the past decade. Several international scholars have taken notable efforts, through systematic investigation, to explore the roles of women in nationalist conflicts (Moser 2001; Kaufman et al. 2007; Sjberg et al. 2007; Enole

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[5] In recent years, particularly over the last decade, a few women rape survivors, for example, Ferdousi Priyobhashini and Haleema Parveen, have started to talk in different national and international media about their traumatic experiences of being raped by the Pakistani soldiers. After remaining in silent for nearly 30 years, they have started to articulate their demand for justice for the violence they experienced in 1971 (D'Costa and Hossain 2010: 242).

2007; Rajan 2011). However, in most cases, all over the world, women's agency in political violence or in war, has hardly received due recognition in different discourses and in cinematic representation.

Hollywood films on the Vietnam conflict or on the Asian war have portrayed women, in a very restrictive and limited way, as 'the stock figure of the prostitute' (Walsh 2004: 196). Most commercially successful war films from Hollywood, (for example, *Saving Private Ryan* [Spielberg, 1998]), do not include American women in combat roles. In case of films that do represent American warrior women in different wars, these have also created those women as 'others', while portraying the sole supremacy of men in the battlegrounds. Recent documentaries, such as *Standard Operating Procedure* (Errol Morris, 2008), depict American military women as more brutal than men soldiers in committing war crimes. However, *SOP* also reveals that the female soldiers were humiliated by their male colleagues and directed to carry out such atrocities. The German screens have projected women's positions in war narratives as 'the helpmates of their heroic husbands or lovers rather than as autonomous agents in their own right' (Cooke 2010: 167). In some cases, cinematic representations of war in Germany, have featured their women in the roles of collaborators by ignoring their sufferings of being raped by the Red Army. The film *A Woman in Berlin* (Max Färberböck, 2008) is one of the key films with such characteristics, in which German women's terrible war experiences have been subdued. It rather gives emphasis to a heterosexual love story of a German woman with the enemy (Red Army soldier). The war films in the Arab world has mostly depicted women in idealized images signifying them as bearers of the nation and placed them within the private sphere or patriarchy (Khatib, 2006: 81). In some instances, if Arab women enter the public arena, or become politically active in films, they do not manifest as central protagonists. Except for Gillo Pontecorvo's *The Battle of Algiers* (1966), which subverts many stereotypical gender norms of nationalist violence by

the depiction of women's direct engagement in the liberation struggle of Algeria, very few Arab films have apprised such female roles. However, *The Battle of Algiers* could not even fully reject the patriarchal feature of nationalist struggle as it depicts Algerian women as directed by the male revolutionaries during the war.

The cinematic treatment of the Liberation War of Bangladesh has also engaged similar mechanisms; representing women as victims, followers, supporters or subordinates. By focusing on the heroic acts of *Mukti Bahini*, most war films have represented the Liberation War with a male gendered bias. Here, one important point of note is that the wars that took place in the Western countries or elsewhere were generally fought by the male professional soldiers. According to Joshua S. Goldstein, in the present day world, 99.9 percent of soldiers in the combat forces who are appointed by the state are male (2001: 10). He also states that the women who are working in the armed forces, belong to the ground combat units and serve the traditional roles of typists or nurses (ibid.: 10). All the combat forces from various parts of the world are depicted as homogeneous, and in most cases, entirely exclude women. Film in general, as a cultural and social text, also corresponds to the reality of the armed forces constituted by states (in all parts of the world) establishing war as an act or a game played solely by men. However, the Liberation War, as I noted earlier, was a people's war, in which the entire population of Bangladesh were involved, except for those Bengalis or Bihari Muslims who collaborated with the Pakistani army. As this thesis argues, by focusing on the heroic acts of *Mukti Bahini,* the majority of cinematic treatments of the Liberation War of Bangladesh have similarly represented this conflict following a masculinist perspective and agenda. This celluloid memory of the war generates women's image as passive and/or victims who are, for the post part, in need of rescuing by heroic men.

It is a common artistic trope of mainstream cultural or literary discourses, including Bangladeshi films, to position the woman's body, particularly the body of the mother, as the symbol of the nation. By foregrounding the mother image to personify the nation, woman has been given a powerful position in the nationalist imaginary of Bangladesh. During different nationalist Movements and anti-colonial struggles in Bangladesh, woman has been projected as the figure of the suffering mother, evoking a strong sense of duty among her sons to protect her. As Gisela Brinker-Gabler and Sidonie Smith argue, 'the making of the nation becomes a masculine activity and the land upon which nation is constituted is feminized, first under the sign of seductive virgin and then under sign of the nurturing mother. Once the nation is founded and the land domesticated, the nation becomes "motherland" ' (1997: 12). Almost a similar mechanism of nation formation operates in Bangladeshi nationalist discourses. For example, in different literary accounts, the country is addressed as *deshmatrika* (motherland) or *Bangla ma* (mother Bengal). Partha Chatterjee notes that the personification of woman as nation in different literary forms (in Indian context), in some way reflects the classical or medieval religious practices of worshiping woman as a goddess; it is, however, an ideological construction of the middle-class, started during the era of nationalism (1993: 130-131).

This metaphoric form of the country as the (generic) mother can be discussed by linking it with the concept of nation as an 'imagined political community' explained by Benedict Anderson (1991: 06). Although Anderson does not specifically mention the promotion of a mother figure signifying the nation in the periods of nation formation of a colonized nation or after its independence, his idea of 'imagined communities' suggests and interrogates a shared notion of kinship between the people or communities within a nation. He intends to relate nationalism more with kinship and religion than with ideology (ibid.: 05). Thus the one he sees informing the construction of the nation, emphasizing

'kinship' (imagined) among members of a nation, also conveys that the nation is an extension of the family unit. This also explains why, in nationalist discourses all over the world, women have been assigned roles that bear cultural and collective values; and why their protection or redemption has achieved utmost importance in nationalist movements. This is necessary for maintaining national pride since women are seen 'as biological reproducer of members of ethnic collectivities' (Anthias and Yuval-Davis 1989: 7).

In a similar vein, woman as mother-nation or motherland has been given central importance in all nationalist narratives of Bangladesh as well as in its war films. However, this iconic projection of woman's role as motherland or nation, despite its gaining of the central importance in any narrative, is ultimately a process of muting the voices of actually existing women. It places the authority or subjectivity of men at the center of the discourses of nation and war by projecting their active performance in protecting the motherland.

The aesthetic strategy of mother's figuration as the nation leads to a problematic representation for the *Birangona*s (raped women in the war) in films. These women have been framed as representing 'shame' or dishonor for the nation. Their raps by the Pakistani soldiers are shown in different narratives as the pollution of the virgin figure of a sister or an exploitation of the mother's body by the enemy. Since Bangladesh gained its independence from Pakistani colonialism, the nationalist discourse inclines to maintain a pure form of the mother figure to represent the nation's sovereignty. This mother figure is always shown as being rescued by her valorous sons during the war. Her purity affirms the purity of the nation and its cultural identity. Then raped women, in most cases, receive a compulsory exclusion at the end of war films by suffering murder, suicide and accidental deaths, or by disappearing in other ways from the narratives and heroes' lives. Similar techniques are also evident in plays on the theme of the Liberation War that eliminate the raped women with a final exit from the texts by their deaths (Siddiqi 1998: 209; Mookherjee 2003: 170). This norm, in fact,

was initiated by the official historiography of Bangladesh through the exclusion of *Birangona*s from different documents and records.

Various national and international sources have cited that almost 200,000 Bengali women and girls were systematically raped and approximately 25,000 were forcefully impregnated by the Pakistani soldiers during the conflict (Brownmiller 1976: 80, 84). This enforced impregnation was an effort to degrade the national identity of Bangladeshis through the production of Pakistani men's children in the wombs of Bengali women. Thus women suffered most by the mechanism of male-driven war and the creation of a nationalist discourse in which Pakistani men violated Bengali *men's* honor and national pride by the systematic strategy of raping Bengali women. These acts also aimed to upgrade the standard of the Islam practised by the Bengalis (Kabeer 2011: 143). The Pakistani rulers, consisting of the populace from West Pakistan, considered that the Bengali Muslims of East Pakistan were lacking the standard 'Muslimness' given their similarities with the Hindus in appearance and cultural practice. However, whatever the mission, captured Bengali women, regardless of their age and religion, were subjected to rape by Pakistani soldiers on the spot and in front of their relatives, in some cases, in periods of detention in military camps during the war.

In the immediate aftermath of the war, the Bangladesh government acknowledged these women's contribution in the war by bestowing on them the title *Birangona*. This is certainly a remarkable effort of Bangladesh government compared to other countries in the world that experienced such victimization of their women in wars and did not declare such an honorific title for the raped women. However, later this title became a term that categorizes those Bengali women as a group of ashamed and invisible women.

During the first three/four years after the war the government's main aim was to reinstate *Birangona*s in the society by adopting various rehabilitation programs. Notable among those programs were mass abortions of the pregnant women, organizing international

adoption of the war children, providing income-generating training programs for the *Birangona*s and arranging marriage for them (D'Costa et al. 2010: 341). Despite the initiation of these significant programs, the government and other national and international NGOs involved in the rehabilitation programs, did not keep the documents and records of the raped women (Mohsin 2004: 20). Thus this disappearance of the *Birangona*s from the historiography and official documents slowly deadened the process of justice. Nor did the government create any platform to accommodate the demands of the 'women rape survivors' for justice.[6] The voices of *Birangona*s was never heard until recently. Society also promoted this silencing process by hiding the traumatic events that occurred to their women in the name of maintaining family honor. This is a double process of women's victimization. They had to suffer first by the outsider enemy during the war and then by their own people and by the state after the independence. Yasmin Saikia says:

> The violence of rape was responded to with more violence by the Bangladeshi state represented by the liberators, Bengali men. Ideals of purity and impurity, belonging and exclusion were worked out and physically enacted on the body of women - the site of alleged national dishonor, and the site where men could display their power to control the imaging of a new 'liberated' nation (2011: 52-3).

So the institutional discourse of the war created a corpus of knowledge that systematically excluded the real experiences of women and their agency in the war. Raped women of the war are typified in the institutional discourses as an occluded group, connoting

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[6] As the mass rape of Bengali women by the Pakistani army was part of a political and systematic plan, the incidence of male rape does not figure here. That is why, I write here 'women rape survivors' to indicate there are indeed only women in the official category of 'rape survivors'. Nayanika Mookherjee makes a first step towards addressing the issue of men's rape in the Liberation War (2012: 73-76). She argues this issue as a hidden register. However, she did not provide any reference to a particular case or statistics on men rape victims in the war. In the third chapter of this thesis, I mention men's sexual abuse through being subjected to their forced nudity by the Pakistani army, carried out to identify the religion of Bengali men.

national 'shame'. Cinema also performed a similar task, reproducing these institutional discourses on *Birangona*s, just it had when it came to women's participation in the Liberation War. Most war films allocate death for *Birangona*s towards the end for maintaining the perception of nation's purity and women's subjectivities are hardly visible there. This strategy of excluding female rape victims guides the collective memories of Bangladeshis to forget the violence that occurred to those women.

The representation of women and nation in the war-themed films of Bangladesh has been selected for this research as this aspect has so far received least critical attention within or outside of Bangladesh. Particularly, extensive research engaging film studies scholarships are few. Furthermore, women's roles in the Liberation War have been constructed by filmmakers in a stereotypical manner as secondary or supportive elements for the narratives. It is a complex process to find the purpose and mechanism of such portrayals. This representation, however, demonstrates the power imbalance and inequity within the social and institutional fabrics of Bangladesh.

Existing literature on the Liberation War themed-films

Kaberi Gayen's book *Muktijudhdher Cholochchitrey Nari-Nirman* [Construction of Women in Films on the Liberation War] (2013) is the first published academic book entirely covering the topic of women's representation in Bangladeshi war films. She mostly focuses on the fictional war films made after the war, although one film, *Jibon Thekey Neaya* (Glimpses of Life, 1970) from the pre-liberation period, is also discussed very briefly. Despite not being able to include the wartime films and post-liberation documentary films on the theme of the Liberation War, Gayen's work is a significant contribution to the field, probing women's representation in Bangladeshi war films. She explores women's representations in war films from a feminist point of view, employing semiotic interpretation of films. Gayen argues that

women's portrayal in such films predominately depicts them as disgraced rape victims, who are allocated death in the end or become mentally disordered or vanish (157, 169). I also find the 'exit' mechanism for raped woman as a frequent norm of war-themed films and which I explain as a masculinist technique of maintaining the purity of the nationalist discourse. This will be discussed further in Chapter Three. There in several instances I refer to Gayen both agreeing with and differing from her views. This I do to position and distinguish my own thoughts from her. However, having written in Bangla/Bengali, Gayen's book is targeted for a local audience. Later, she publishes a concise version of the book in English as a journal paper in *French Journal for Media Research* (2015), aiming to reach the global audience. It has been, however, an over ambitious attempt as the paper undertakes a large span of time, with the commitment of discussing 26 full-length and 7 short fictional war films from pre- and post-war periods. In many cases, the paper could not do justice to the broadness of the topic by offering an in-depth analysis of the films.

Some recent Bengali publications (Hasan 2011; Hayat 2011) address the Liberation War-themed films as their main contents, which help in providing many important information, data and accounts regarding the films' productions and their contents. However, none of the books are concerned with women's representation in such films. Nor are they critical of the nation making procedure of war films which is male biased and is a recurring phenomenon of such films. Despite that, these books are informative, and I refer to them on many occasions where it is needed.

Amidst the book written in English language, Alamgir Kabir's book, *Film in Bangladesh* (1979), is the first one to be published. It is a significant publication, introducing a critical approach in writing the film history of Bangladesh from the early period (1895) to 1979. Both compiling historical accounts of Bangladeshi cinema by placing it in the broader socio-political contexts of different periods and by including the insightful discussion, the

book becomes a pioneer source and reference for the researchers. The later publications by other Bangladeshi authors (Qader 1993; Hayat 1987; Islam 2008) notably elaborate the film history of Bangladesh, however, they also, more or less, follow the path set by Kabir. In his discussion of war films of Bangladesh, Kabir is the first critic to identify the commercial exploitation of the representation of rape victims by the early Bangladeshi filmmakers through an eroticized portrayal of the rape sequences of Bengali women by the Pakistani army (55). Before Kabir's early death in 1989, his several more written works, both in article forms (1989a; 1989b) and in shorter pieces he published in his English language film magazine, *Sequence*, contributed remarkably to the history and criticism of Bangladeshi film.

Recently, one or two researchers, in the international level, have endeavored to analyze individual war films, with the aim of exploring women's experiences in the war through a feminist reading of the films (Chowdhury 2015; 2016). These readings provide newness and, in some instances, aspire to fill up the huge vacuum in regard to the studies on the representations of women in war films of Bangladesh. However, they mainly involve a sociological reading of the films, rather than using different dynamics of the film's medium, such as lighting, editing or camera work for reading the more complex layers of the dilmmic narrative. Moreover, very few researchers on women in Bangladeshi war films include or explore the relationship between women and nationalism in films (Mookherjee 2006[2011]). On the other hand, those scholars who are inclined to probe the perception of nationalism or national identity in Bangladeshi cinema, do not recognize the gendered nature of the nationalist discourse of Bangladesh (Raju 2015; Hood 2015).

The Bleeding Lotus: Notions of Nation in Bangladeshi Cinema (2015) written by a Kolkata based Australian scholar, John W. Hood, is a recent book, mainly on the discussion of the films on the Liberation War. Hood reviews comprehensive range of independent films

on the Liberation War. On the other hand, he tends to read in a slightly isolated manner, downplaying references to the films' contextual periods within which they are produced. Thus his reading lacks the fear, warmth and politics of the periods in which the films are made. In addition, Hood does not discuss how audience viewed these films, nor does engage in any explicit dialogue with other authors on the topic. Nonetheless, his readings of the war films are imaginative and thought provoking. He studies different subject matters of the films with the main goal to explore the notions of nation. However, Hood does not examines the dynamics of nationalism through the lens of gender. For example, at the time of discussing *Chitra Nodir Parey* (Quite Flows the River Chitra, 1998) a film on the theme of Bengal partition by Tanvir Mokammel, he links the notion of Bengaliness with 'homeland' (24). He further refers to another film by Mokammel *Nodir Nam Modhumoti* (The River Called Modhumati, 1995) to support the concept of home as the notion of nation. At this point, he translates the Bengali word *desh* (country/land) as home (26). I also agree that *desh* can be described as home but that we do not find as the emphasis of the film. *Desh* has been explained in the film by a freedom fighter as the 'tears of mother'. I quote the following dialogues of two freedom fighters from the film on *desh*:

> Bachchu: What does *desh* mean? Is it this paddy field, jute field, river?
> Akhtar: It is more than that […] Mother and mother land is holier than heaven […]
> Listen carefully, it seems that a mother is crying. The country is now in deep sorrow.

In Bengali language, *desh* (country) is feminine in character and its synonyms are *jonmobhumi*, *dharitri*, *deshmatrika*. For many years, in Bangladesh, which is rural in nature, the country has been addressed and worshiped as the mother. Here it is worth quoting from Tanika Sarkar as she writes about the concept of '*Deshmata*' (Motherland) in her article on 19th century Bengali literature and its dominant conceptualization of woman in the image of

the country: 'the country is not a piece of land with actual people living on it. It is abstracted from the people and is then personified as the Mother Goddess, the most recent and the most sacred deity in the Hindu pantheon' (1987: 2011). The mother is traditionally regarded as the source of livelihood and food, connoting an active embodiment in Bengali culture. Thus she is also hailed as '*Jaggaddhatri* (the nurturer of the world)' and '*Annapurna* (the giver of food)' as evidenced in various forms of Bengali literature, particularly that of the 19th century evoking strong patriotic sentiment (ibid.: 2012). In the Bangladeshi war films, mother is also greeted again and again but in the form of a suffering or passive figure who has been rescued by her sons. Hood's search for the notions of nation is rarely critical of this nation making mechanism evident in the Bangladeshi war films.

Zakir Hossain Raju's research (2015) is an important work that probes the cultural identity of Bengali Muslims through analysis and discussion of film history from 1890 to 2010. Featuring a vast span of time, Raju is committed to locate the progress of nationalism with the development of cinema. He narrates the cinema history of Bangladesh through a range of socio-political contexts, although skipping the pre-war films that sprang up from the rise of Bengali nationalism such as *Jibon Thekey Neya* (The Glimpse of Life, 1970) and the films made during the Liberation War are missing. His exclusion of the discussion of the periods just before and during the Liberation War, which are crucial periods for both the national and cinema history of Bangladesh, creates a sharp vacuum in his research. Discussion on the mainstream war films in independent Bangladesh are also absent. Despite this, his analyses of some independent films that deal with the theme of the Liberation War are relevant to my project and provide insightful discussion. Yet, we do not find any reference to women's position in the making of national narrative or cinema history of Bangladesh, nor any indication of their framings in the cinematic system of identity-creation.

A similar blind spot with regard to gender appears to limit those few works that deal with documentary filmmaking and the Liberation War.

Researches on the Liberation War-themed documentary films are few. Shahaduzzaman's research (2009) on wartime films of Bangladesh; Naeem Mohaiemen and, Rehnuma Sazzad's papers (2016; 2013) on the documentary film *Muktir Gaan* (Song of Freedom, 1995), which is regarded as the most powerful film among all genre of war films of Bangladesh, are notable. These researchers deal with several important aspects of the documentary films, for example, the films' historical values, ways of making the documentary reality and about their audience's reception. However, the politics of the documentary films in portraying gender differences in the discourse of the Liberation War following the institutional and cultural framework of gender are not critically analyzed in these works.

There are some social scientists who undertake methodological researches to scrutinize the relationship between women and nation in various war discourses and in historiography. Their scholarship (D'Costa 2011; Saikia 2011; Mookherjee 2015) is remarkable, particularly in creating awareness both in national and international levels about the traumatic experiences of the raped women during the Liberation War and their plight in the after war situation in which they were stigmatized by conventional societal attitude. These scholars are also critical about the patriarchal activities of the state and cultural elites, who dominate the discourse of history writing and the public remembrance of the war in which the stories of the raped women have been marginalized. Nayanika Mookherjee in this body of work includes films' discussion along with other cultural and literary discourses for finding these media's mechanism for representing raped women of the Liberation War (2015: 194-195, 199). Mookherjee's discussions of the films, however, are very brief since

she covers many more aspects of the public remembrance of raped women in her research in which war films provide only a minor focus.

All the literature mentioned above is influential and relevant to my investigation. However, I refer to them in my research, where it is appropriate, in order to deepen the understanding of the topic of my own study and to distinguish my position in comparison to them. My ways of reading of the films are also necessarily incomplete as they are holding a certain set of positional views with the aim of scrutinizing the portrayals and relationships of gender, war and nation in the cinematic canvas of Bangladesh. However, at this point, I need to mention that my research endeavors to cover the topic more widely, analyzing films from the pre-liberation era, films made during the Liberation war and the post-liberation films on the theme of the war produced until recently. Moreover, I scrutinize diverse genres of films from melodrama to documentary films, full-length to short fictional films and mainstream to alternative films. Apart from the researches mentioned above, I shall deploy film studies scholarship concerning the representation of history, nation, women and war in films both from the East and the West.

Aims

The language of cinema with the combination of sight, sound and movement is a unique one that can 'redeem the past, rescue the real, and even rescue that which was never real' (Elsaesser 1996: 166). The events, real or unreal, that film rescues mostly meet the collective desire of a nation and sometimes help audiences to see things differently. Cinema thus provides a framework that directly and indirectly influences cultural construction through negotiating with the cultural aspirations of a particular society. Consequently, women's and nation's representation in the war films of Bangladesh serve the cultural and social impulses of Bangladesh. This study aims to unpack the politics as well as the

aesthetics of the war films, contextualizing them as they intersect with the socio-historical contexts. It further highlights actors and aspects from the broad national spectrum that were involved in the production of ideas about gender and nation in both collective, public memory, and in the cinema.

I also believe there is an urgent need for systematic research, involving scholarship to investigate the representation of historical film in dealing with women, nation and war. It is needed, firstly, to interrogate film's way of constructing history and secondly, to probe the purpose of its meaning production and effect on audiences in relation to their understanding of history. This kind of research will also promote a critical insight to point out the concerns and politics of the present day that intervene in the representations of war films. This critical insight may allow for a resistance against the existing male-centered imaging of history in films. Such research is therefore significant for enhancing our consciousness of the historical complexities occurring in war films. Here, by mentioning historical complexities constructed in films, I am not appealing for a 'true' portrayal of history in war films, because I concur with Peter Wollen that, 'the truth is not out there in the real world' (1985: 509). For instance, the Liberation War of 1971 has multi-layered stories and it is remembered in three different ways in the official histories of Bangladesh, Pakistan and India (Saikia 2011: 3-4). For Bangladeshis, this war was a grand resistance against Pakistani colonialism through which they gained freedom and independence. India regards this war as an 'Indo-Pak conflict' in which it gave a good lesson to its rival neighbor, Pakistan, and was able to dismember its territory by providing support for helpless Bengalis during the war. Pakistan's official history tries hard to omit this episode of dispute as it contains their defeat by what many regarded as the inferior race, Bengalis. The war is mostly considered in Pakistan as a civil war and as a '"betrayal" by the Bengalis' (ibid.: 3-4). So, history, particularly the official one, is a systematic construction that attains the group's or national interest. Thus, creating the truth

on cinematic canvas or in written history is an unattainable task as both of them are construction.

This research, then, strives to appeal to the filmmakers to create a new cinematic language, using both fictional and factual elements and approaches, to gesture and retrieve women's real experiences in the Liberation War. Moreover, this research will introduce a new cinematic reading of history that will help to identify and to challenge the patriarchal power structure of Bangladeshi society. That power pattern has solely favored men in the writing of history or in directing films. This study will also contribute to critical debates in the wider field of scholarship concerning the dynamics of filmic representations of women, war and nation.

Overview of chapters

To understand the Liberation war-themed films it is imperative to place these films within the broader context of Bangladeshi national cinema. Chapter One discusses both the textual and industrial practices of Bangladeshi cinema, its historical journey, its relationship with the existing socio-economic and political realities, and its way of constructing perceptions of nationhood or national identity on screens. The central focus of this chapter is to establish the concept of national cinema and to find its changing nature in Bangladesh. This change has occurred in tandem with the transformations of cultural identity and political conditions in different periods. This chapter also includes a close analysis of a pre-liberation film *Jibon Theke Neya* (*Glimpses of Life*, 1970) by Zahir Raihan (1935-72). Although this film is not a war film, it must be discussed in the first instance, as it contains resonances of the pre-war situation and depicts the Bengali nation's demand for freedom through metaphoric cinematic language. My reading of the film explores how men and women are framed differently in a progressive film that gives voice to the collective concerns of Bengalis. Finally, I return to

the discussion of the war films that deal with the most grand episode of Bangladeshi national history and have been influential in shaping the national memory. This chapter concludes finding the answer to the following question: why and how should war films be considered as the key films of Bangladeshi national cinema?

Chapter Two deals with the wartime films on the theme of the Liberation War. Covering films made by international and local directors, this chapter examines the aesthetics of wartime documentary films. I look at the ways in which different filmmakers from various countries, both from the East and the West, captured the war to project their own perspective and agendas. The themes of nation and women have been interpreted in the wartime films following the directors' nationality, social interests, cultural practices and political beliefs. Wartime films by Bangladeshi filmmakers secured a specific aesthetic form and knowledge of the Liberation War that differs from films by Indian or Western film directors, although they all recorded the same historical event. In this connection, I closely analyze the film *Stop Genocide* (1971) directed by a Bangladeshi film director, Zahir Raihan. This film articulated an ethical appeal for an active response from the (international) spectators by mostly following a third cinema framework. Its dialectic cinematic language has revealed the war's atrocity in a way that seeks critical responses to the course of the bloody war and to the location of its causes and consequences. However, despite having an advanced filmic approach, my concern, ultimately, is to look at *Stop Genocide*'s strategies of recording and representing gender: how differently did this film capture Bengali men and women during the nationalist struggle for the land?

Chapters Three and Four focus on the war films of Bangladesh that are made after the independence of the country. In these two chapters, I divide war films into two broad categories: mainstream war films and independent war films. Chapter Three focuses on the mainstream war films of Bangladesh, made from 1972 to 2011, and examines their dynamics

in representing women, nation and the war. Mainstream films are mostly those war films that gained institutional support, like state funding, production facilities from the Bangladesh Film Development Corporation (BFDC), state assistance during their screening phases both in conventional cinema theaters or on the state-owned Bangladesh Television (BTV).

In this chapter, my main concern is to locate the dominant discourse of mainstream war films of Bangladesh as shaping the prevailing perceptions of women and nation in narratives concerning the Liberation War. I also explore how the mainstream films negotiate with the hegemonic concept of nation and promote a selective history of the war that serves the ruling government's interest. I endeavour to uncover the mechanism of mainstream war films in different periods through textual analyses of four films: *Ora Egaro Jon* (Those Eleven Men, 1972), *Megher Onek Rong* (Many Colors of the Cloud, 1976), *Aguner Poroshmoni* (Kindling Blaze, 1994) and *Guerrilla* (2011). These four films are selected for close analyses as they have impacted immensely on their contemporary audiences. Their influence cannot be judged solely by their screenings in cinema theaters or business at the box-office. For example, *Megher Onek Rong* was withdrawn from the cinemas just a day after its release. Later, through its frequent airings on the BTV in the 1980s, it was able to gain a substantial visibility and, therefore, to dominate the collective memory of the war. Different factors work behind the selections of these films for the close analysis, among which notable are: popularity, production value, textual operations, narrative structure, distribution arrangements, receipt of state funding and the National Film Awards. I also discuss in some detail the different eras in which these films are produced. This is to find the politics of the contemporary contexts in making sense of the past. At same time, other war films produced in different eras are listed and discussed briefly to explore the tendencies of films from individual periods.

Chapter Four explores the cinematic aesthetics of independent/alternative films in representing women and nation in the films about the Liberation War. Independent films in Bangladesh emerged in the 1980s through the 'Short Film Movement', led by young film activists and filmmakers. From film production to distribution, in each phase of the filmmaking process, these films employ alternative forms and approaches, denying the authority of traditional studio-based film productions. Initially, independent filmmakers employed the medium as a serious art form in which they introduced allegorical expression to criticize the government that was run by the autocratic General H. M. Ershad during the 1980s. In this period, they also selected the theme of the Liberation War as the main content of their films, through which they endeavored to forge a national identity, and alternative versions of history, that were suppressed by the state through its selective dissemination of the history of the war. Slowly, along with the theme of the Liberation War, different subjects such as myths, rural locations, tradition and women's oppression appeared in these films as their key focuses. Drawing on Rey Chow's concept of 'primitive passions', I argue, in this chapter, that these films' portrayals of such themes are to exoticize or orientalize Bangladeshis' self/national image in order to attract both the national elite audiences' attention and the Western gaze (1995).

In this chapter, I closely analyze three independent films from different periods: *Agami* (The Time Ahead, 1984), *Muktir Gaan* (Song of Freedom, 1995), and *Shilalipi* (The Inscription, 2002). These films evidence diverse characteristics, despite their broader classification as independent films. For example, *Agami* is a short fictional film, *Muktir Gaan* is a documentary film, while *Shilalipi* is a feminist film, although they all focus on the theme of the war as their main content. Besides the close analyses of the films, I further discuss various independent war-themed films along with a brief description of the different eras in which they were produced. In this chapter, my main concern is to find the visual

strategies of independent films in portraying the themes of women and nation in the context of the Liberation War. I also look at how differently these themes have been treated in independent films compared to mainstream films.

In conclusion, I summarize the argument of the previous chapters about the cinematic treatment of women and nation in the context of the Liberation War in different periods, from 1970 to 2011. I suggest that the construction of these subjects in war themed films has been influenced by the culture, politics and ideology of different periods, rather than by the real-historical experiences of women during the war.

CHAPTER ONE

Panning from the Past to the Present: The Climate, Context and Concept of

Bangladeshi National Cinema

Introduction

> Decades long [sic] negligence found this region totally lacking in primary filming equipment, film production know how of any kind or level and, worst of all, minimum capital for investment in film production. But what it never lacked was a great audience potential.
>
> Alamgir Kabir, 'Bangladesh Cinema: A Critical Note,' (1989a: 47)

An enthusiastic audience has always played a key role and been a legitimate part of the Bangladeshi film industry. Despite having a Muslim-majority population for whom, at least until 1965, watching film was considered 'as something "sinful" ' (Kabir 1989a: 50), Bangladesh, since its establishment as a country, has embraced cinema both as a popular art form and a profit-making entertainment industry. Cinema's influence on various components of public culture has been inevitable. People here celebrate their festivals and happy moments by watching films in cinema theaters or on television, accompanied by their families and friends. Celebrity magazines, filled with gossip and stories of film celebrities, are a source of entertainment for them. Shows featuring movie songs, such as *Chayachondo* on television and *Ganer Dali* on the radio, are still the most popular programs for many Bangladeshis. They are accustomed to seeing the flamboyant colors and lines of rickshaw paintings featuring the faces of popular movie stars.[7] The Bangladeshi audiences enjoy sharing the stories they see in movies; their voices easily reproduce the tunes featured on film soundtracks. They adopt the styles and demeanor of the movie stars they admire. A

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[7] Rickshaws are a popular form of transport in Bangladesh and rickshaw paintings are the highly decorative art works that are fixed on the side and lower rear bar of rickshaws.

short while ago, these scenarios were associated with the characteristics of the Bangladeshis and their cultural practices. During the 1960s and 1970s, cinema was a major source of entertainment for the urban middle-classes alone. More recently, the reputation of Bangladeshi cinema has dropped off, deterring highbrow and middle-class audiences.

Throughout this chapter, the historical and regional contexts of Bangladeshi national film culture will be outlined. Important considerations include the analytical approaches and complexities required in defining the concept of Bangladeshi national cinema. At the same time, this chapter examines the role of films in structuring Bangladeshi national culture and identity. Consequently, I discuss the formation and transformation of the idea of nationalism in Bangladesh during different periods, both in its pre- and post-colonial phases. The chapter also looks at how this transforming nature of nationalism has affected film culture and vice versa, how cinema has been influential in altering identity issues both on screen and in the wider cultural landscape of Bangladesh.

Although the main objective of this project is to study the representation of women and nation in the war films of Bangladesh, it is necessary to understand the concept of Bangladeshi national cinema from the very beginning. It is of help to locate the positions and contributions of war films to the concept of national cinema. War films have been important in structuring the perception of the Bangladeshi nation through their diverse representations of the theme and history of the Liberation War. These films have also played a key role in shaping the collective memories of the past that evoke the sense of identity and common belongings for Bangladeshis.

The concept of 'national cinema', in most instances, is analyzed by linking it with the sociological idea of the nation and the national identity of a country. The national film industry, production, textuality, discourses, censorship, the nation-state's policies and support, national audience, exhibition practices, different national film movements, cultural

specificity or diversity of a nation-state are all regarded as influential factors for studying national cinema (Croft cited in Hjort and Mackenzie 2000: 3-4; Berry and Farquhar 2006: 9). Studies on national cinema incline to point out the distinct qualities of a nation-state's films and their differences from films produced in other countries. However, the idea of national cinema has been a negotiated and changing concept, particularly in the heyday of globalization. In the present-day, the aspects of cultural specificity or distinctiveness of a nation are constantly being transformed by the influence of the outer world, through a state's connections with the wide range of transnational media. Andrew Higson argues that national cinema is the 'product of a tension between "home" and "away"' (2000: 67). Thus, in discussing the national cinema of Bangladesh, it is also essential to consider both the specificity of Bangladeshi national culture and the outward influences it gains through its global encounter.

In this chapter, I address and discuss a series of issues: a brief historical overview of Bangladeshi cinema; the composition and changes of nationalism in Bangladesh; its relationship with film culture during the pre-and post-liberation eras; women's position or participation both in the nationalist projects and in cinema during colonial era (1947-1971); a brief account of the contemporary film industry and its transnational encounter; and how and why the war films should be seen as the best examples of national cinema of Bangladesh. I also offer a close analysis of the film *Jibon Thekey Neya* (Glimpses of Life, 1970) by Zahir Raihan. This film was released just before the Liberation War and was influential in depicting the cultural and economic exploitation of Bengalis by the West Pakistani rulers through a metaphoric cinematic language. Despite the fact that it is not a war film, this film portrays the ambience of the pre-war situation in which Bengalis' longing for freedom and the rise of Bengali nationalism are articulated animatedly.

In this modern world, the flow of different forms of advanced media such as the internet and television are escalating rapidly. A developing country like Bangladesh, with a 'low literacy rate', which is mainly rural in character, is unable to offer access to those media to all of its citizens.[8] Thus the popularity and influence of an audio-visual medium like film is far more persuasive than any other cultural-electronic media in this country. Although the popularity of television is becoming greater, due to its easier availability, than the cinema projection arrangement in theaters, in point of fact, the television industry is also dependent on cinema. Cinema and cinema-related shows take up huge proportions of the airtime of television channels. These channels are also coming forward to producing different genres of films. As a result, in South Asia, Bangladesh should be regarded as the second leading country, after India, given that it produced, on average, 80 to 100 films annually in the 1990s (Masud 2011: n.p.) and 102 feature films in 2005 (Hayat 2006: 13).

The origin of Bangladeshi cinema predates the formation of Bangladesh as a nation-state. The history of cinema projection there goes back more than 100 years, beginning in 1898 (Hayat 1987: 01; Nasreen and Haq 2008: 30; Ahsan 2009: 79). Silent film production started its journey in colonial Bengal with the filmmaking ventures of Hiralal Sen, a Bengali man from Manik Ganj of the East Bengal[9] during the 1900s. Sound fiction film production began in East Pakistan in the Bengali language in 1956 with the film *Mukh o Mukhosh* (Face and Mask) by Abdul Jabbar Khan (Qader 1993: 105-106). Having equipped itself with shooting, editing, sound dubbing, lab and printing facilities, the East Pakistan Film Development Corporation (EPFDC) was founded in 1958 (Islam 2008: 16). With its support and production facilities, films began to be produced on a regular basis from 1959 onwards.

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[8] 'Bangladesh has a low literacy rate of 43.1% (2003) estimate […]' (Mitra and et al. 2006: 48).

[9] I mentioned earlier in the introduction (page 2) that Bangladesh was known as East Bengal during the British period and as East Pakistan in the Pakistan period (1947-1971). So, while referring to different periods' films or history, I address Bangladesh as East Bengal, East Pakistan and Bangladesh following the particular point in history.

The Liberation War of 1971, through which Bangladesh came into being, created comparatively greater scope than before for film-makers to emerge and make their films in their sole national language, Bengali, covering their own stories, culture and social life. The National Film Award was first introduced in 1975; the allocation of state-funding as grants in film making started in 1976; and the Film Archive was founded in 1978 (Hayat 2006: 15). The Film Censor Board, under the Ministry of Information of the Bangladesh Government, was re-established in 1978. The beginning of the Short Film Movement in the mid-1980s helped emerging young film-makers who initiated an independent and low-budget filmmaking approach avoiding the Bangladesh Film Development Corporation (BFDC) (Hoek 2014a: 26). An international film festival began in 1981with the support from the government and then the Bangladesh Short Film Forum organized the first international short film festival in 1988 (Qader 1993: 549, 551). These are some important events initiated by individuals or different organizations or by the state to erect a distinctive structure for Bangladeshi cinema.

However, despite these initiatives a qualitative change didn't take place in the industrial and aesthetic practices of present Bangladeshi popular cinema. The industry is heading towards a decay (Nasrin and Haq 2008: 179). This chapter is keen to locate those complexities revolving around the current condition of Bangladeshi cinema. However, before that, the concepts of nation and national cinema in Bangladesh need to be discussed.

Frame within frame: Locating the (trans)formation of 'national cinema' alongside the perception of 'national identity' and a few flashbacks

It is hard to define accurately the idea of a 'nation'. It may not have a territorial boundary in the same manner as a state; it might instead be suggested by the common cultural markers of identity, history and language of a community. Benedict Anderson interprets nation as an

'imagined political community' (1991: 6). He argues that the members of a nation carry a common likeliness of their communion in their imagination (ibid.: 6). This common image helps them to feel connected with other fellow-members of the nation without knowing each other. So a nation's core elements are community and their homogeneous (imagined) identity. Conversely, a state's main condition lies in its possession of a territorial boundary, and it is governed by a set of legal and political organizations. Nation and state, although having distinct features, are congruous and cannot be analyzed separately. Susan Hayward says 'the state is founded in the nation and the nation is constituted as the state'; she also highlights the significant role of nationalist discourses in creating a connection between state and nation (2000b: 89-90). In Eric Hobsbawm's words, '[…] nationalism comes before nations. Nations do not make states and nationalism but the other way around' (1992: 10). So nationalism is a distinct phenomenon or ideology through which a community or nation demonstrates the aspiration to form or maintain a state. Hobsbawm's views offer a useful explanation of the way, in which, Bengali nationalism emerged before the formation of the nation-state of Bangladesh. The profound strength of Bengali nationalism that emerged within the Bengali nation of East Pakistan led them to the fight for autonomy and a sovereign nation-state.

Although language, race, ethnicity, religion, shared culture and common historical experience are the predisposing forces in the propagation of nationalism, in the case of the identity construction of the Bengali Muslim in East Bengal, 'language' and 'religion' were the core factors that shaped the collective identity, followed by factors that came to prominence individually or blended together, on various occasions over the century. Many conflicting and complex questions arose later relating to national identity about whether Bangladeshis are Bengali first and Muslims second or Muslim first then Bengali second. How should their national identity distinguish them from the Bengali speaking community

of West Bengal in India? Here we need to note that in Bangladesh, there live diverse minority groups who are not of Bengali ethnicity. Again, there are many Bengalis who are not Muslims either. Yet, they contributed remarkably in the Liberation War and are part of the nation. Thus another important question emerges: How would the nation state accommodate indigenous ethnic minorities who do not speak Bengali within an inclusive Bengali nationalism?

The emergence of Bangladesh sprang partly from the secular consciousness of Bengali nationalism and the linguistic identity of Bengalis, and partly from the economic deprivation of East Pakistanis by the rulers of Pakistan who consisted mainly of West Pakistanis. In 1947, India became independent from British colonial rule. The partition of India took place in the same year, creating India and Pakistan. Although India was founded as a secular republic, it slowly became the state of the Hindu majority population with Pakistan as the country for Muslim majorities. Before 1947, a pan-Indian fellow feeling was evident among the Muslims and Hindus of India, who were united in their struggle against British colonial rule. However, it did not last to the end. The Muslim elites, particularly Muslim landlords, businessmen, political leaders and bureaucrats, made strong demands for a separate state for Indian Muslims, free from the domination and exploitation of middle-class Indian Hindus. Despite the rising demand for an independent country for Indian Muslims, there also arose another hope among Muslims League Leaders of East Bengal to form a United Bengal as an independent country, to be created by the unification of both the Hindu-dominated western part of Bengal and Muslim-dominated East Bengal.[10] Many

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[10] After the first partition of Bengal (in 1905), the All-India Muslim League was formed in Dhaka in 1906 by some upper-class Muslims (Van Schendel 2009:83). This new party represented the voices of Bengali Muslims and the Muslims from of all over India. The Muslim League leaders countered the anti-division agitation led by the Indian National Congress party after the first partition of Bengal. Later, many years following the re-union of Bengal (in 1911), particularly just before the partition of India in 1947, they favoured having a United Bengal as an independent country, although they also wanted to form a homeland for Indian Muslims (ibid.: 93).

political leaders of the Indian National Congress Party, however, were against it, and initiated a campaign for the partition of Bengal in 1946 (Van Schendel 2009: 93). At the same time, the Hindu *bhodrolok* (middle-class) supported the creation of an individual homeland for the Hindus (Chatterji, 1995).[11] Consequently, on 20 June 1947, the majority of representatives of Hindu-majority constituencies voted in the Bengal Legislative Assembly for partition, while members representing Muslim-majority constituencies voted against it (Chatterji 1999: 188). The peasants of East Bengal also supported moves for a separate Muslim homeland, realizing this might bring about an end to the domination of Hindu landlords. Towards the end of British colonial rule, a consciousness sprang up among the Muslim peasantry of East Bengal, motivating them to get involved in different political activities and come forward to improve their socio-economic conditions. Taj-ul Hashmi calls this consciousness a 'peasant utopia'. Hashmi believes that this utopia eventually 'led to the creation of a separate homeland for the Muslims in the region, East Pakistan, and in the long run the state of Bangladesh' (1992: 2).

Pakistan emerged as a country in August 1947 and initially comprised five provinces: Punjab, Sind, Baluchistan, the North-West Frontline province and East Pakistan (the largest part of Bengal's territory which later became Bangladesh from 1971). This newly emerged Muslim majority country, Pakistan, was created in the hope that it was to be a prosperous and deprivation-free country for Indian Muslims. Despite being separated from each other nearly by '1,500 km of Indian terrain' and having very little in common both culturally and linguistically, East and West Pakistan, then united solely on the basis of their Muslim identity, formed the nation-state of Pakistan in 1947 (Van Schendel 2013: 177). Thus Pakistan was strongly rooted in religious-based nationalism. However, the strength of this

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[11] *bhodrolok* is a term labelled by many historians and critics, indicating the English-educated Hindu elites in colonial Bengal (Van Schendel 2009: 65; Hoek 2014a: 19).

religious nationalism later proved fragile as the linguistic identity of Bengalis emerged to be more vigorous than their Muslim identity, leading them to fight for their own land in 1971. Moreover, the practices of Islam in West Pakistan and East Pakistan were different in many aspects.

The original settlers of Bengal migrated from south-east Asia to this region carrying their 'agrarian practices and animist belief system' (Kabeer 2011: 140). Many of them embraced Islam during the 13th century. Since most of the inhabitants of this region initially belonged to the lower Hindu castes, they experienced social deprivation, and converted to Islam as a religion which propounded a philosophy of greater social equality. However, for many years, the culture and custom of Bengal had been syncretized by the influences and fusion of different religions such as Buddhism, Hinduism, Sufism and finally Islam (Sobhan 1994: 65, 66).

There was another group of Muslims, an elite in Bengali society who called themselves *Ashraf*. The Urdu- and Persian-speaking *Ashrafs*' ancestry came from outside Bengal and there was a widening gap between this elite group and the rural masses of East Bengal on the basis of their language and cultural practices. The two silent films, *Sukumari* (1927) and *The Last Kiss* (1931), produced by the Dhaka Nawab family can be seen as film ventures by *Ashraf*s. The Dhaka Nawab family was the owner of Dhaka Nawab Estate and held political power during the British colonial era. Their close alliance with the ruling authorities and their Urdu-oriented cultural practices created a deliberate distance between them and the local masses. Thus the films failed to create any impact among the majority of local people. Despite this, *The Last Kiss* should be considered as a significant addition to the film history of Bangladesh as it was the first East Bengal feature film to cast women performers. The two actresses, Lolita and Charubala, came from red light areas, and another actress Horimotee was a famous *Baijee* (dancer) of Dhaka (Qader 1993: 75). *The Last Kiss*

was released in 1931 at the Mukul cinema hall in Dhaka, introduced by renowned historian Dr Ramesh Chandra Majumdar, a professor at Dhaka University. The film, having Bengali, English and Urdu subtitles, ran for one month at the Mukul cinema hall (ibid.: 76). However, the Nawabs did not encourage many of the people of East Bengal to come forward and make their own films. They fell silent after these two projects and, as a result, the films are usually noted among the family's bizarre hobbies, rather than considered as an important stage in the cinematic history of Bangladesh.

Despite having religious similarities, there was, in fact, very little in common between the elite *Ashraf*s and the *Atrap*s (low-caste-Hindu converts). During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the beliefs and cultural practices of Bengali Muslims were somewhat similar to their Hindu counterparts. Jadunath Sarkar, a renowned Bengal historian, states that 'the Muslim [m]asses, knowing only Bengali, heard the poems and stories in Bengali, witnessed performances based on these at Hindu festivals, patronised by Hindu Zamindars. Thus, the mental background of the Bengali Muslim was more Hindu than Muslim' (cited in Khan 1985: 838). Consequently, during the Pakistan period, the ruling elite of Pakistan, consisting largely of West Pakistanis, treated the Bengali Muslims as inferior Muslims, given the Hindu influences in their language and cultural practices. Equally, Bengali Muslims of East Bengal were not even considered as similar to the Bengali-speaking residents of Kolkata (formerly known as Calcutta) during the nineteenth century when Bengal was a region belonging entirely to the Bengali-speaking masses, consisting of the East and Western part of Bengal.

Kolkata became the colonial capital of the British Indian empire from the late eighteenth century to 1911. Here a newly emerged middle-class and upper-caste Hindus were able to come forward and developed a 'natural momentum of growth', by means of their close collaborations with the British rulers throughout the century (Kabir 1979: 12).

There were distinctive disparities between the two Bengals. Muslims were usually isolated from the political and cultural centrality of colonial Bengal. They were regarded as low status following the defeat of Muslim rulers in the battle of Plassey by the British East India Company in 1757; and in most sectors, such as education, the arts, trade or government services, Bengali Muslims were less developed than the Bengali Hindus. A similar scenario was evident in the film industry. Film studios, cinema houses, film companies, actors, actresses, and technicians all crowded around Kolkata. Cinema rapidly emerged as a full-fledged industry, overwhelmingly controlled by Hindus. In contrast, Bengali Muslims from East Bengal were mostly isolated from the film industry and film-related activities. Moreover, watching cinema or becoming involved in cinema-related activities were considered unseemly for the Bengali Muslims which is an additional reason for their lesser involvement in this industry. Despite the obstacles, however, Obaidul Huq, a Muslim man from East Bengal, under the Hindu pseudonym of Himadri Chowdhuruy, made a film *Dukhey Jader Jibon Gora* (Misery is Their Lot), released in 1946. The film centered on the famine of 1943. Alamgir Kabir, the pioneering Bangladeshi film critic-historian, film activist and film director, has credited this film, which came to fruition thanks to Haq's insatiable personal ambition, as 'the first film ever by a Bengali Moslem [Muslims]' (1979: 17).

However, the minority role of Bengali Muslims intensified the desire for a Muslim middle-class, and ultimately for a separate Muslim nation. The Muslim-dominated East Bengal was united with the new nation state of Pakistan in 1947, although, as discussed above, within the different classes of Bengali Muslims there was no clear consensus on the partition of Bengal. After the creation of Pakistan, a divide between the Muslims of East and West Pakistan started to appear soon. The Bengali Muslims of East Pakistan were facing cultural, political and economic disparities. The crisis point was reached when Urdu, a language spoken only by seven percent of the population, was declared as the sole national

language of Pakistan by the ruling authorities in 1948 (Jahan 1997: 292). In response to the announcement, widespread agitation broke out among the Bengali masses in Dhaka, particularly among students. They demanded that the Bengali language, which was the language of 54 percent of Pakistan's population, become the state language. This was followed by the Language movement in 1952, resulting in the death of several students in East Pakistan. Finally, the government was compelled to declare both Urdu and Bengali as national languages of Pakistan. The Language movement mobilized and boosted a new spirit of Bengali nationalism that resumed the rural traditions, cultural distinctiveness and ethnic-linguistic identity of Bengal. This new consciousness of linguistic identity/nationalism through cultural restoration was, in fact, an enterprise by largely rural-born middle-class Bengali Muslims of East Pakistan. Rounaq Jahan termed them as 'vernacular elites' (2013: 184-185). These vernacular elites employed the new consciousness of Bengali nationalism which emerged from the language movement as a means of defending Bengali language and culture both against the dominance of West Pakistan and against the upper-class Muslims who migrated from West Bengal or India to East Pakistan during the partition. Lotte Hoek says 'this vernacular elite invoked a cultural nation that was not un-Islamic but whose main affective response relied on references to the Bengali language and its culture' (2014a: 18). Consequently, a strong effort to create a self-image of rural Bengal became evident in the different areas of art, culture and literary accounts during this period. Later, the demand for and movement towards the economic and political autonomy of this land which finally ushered in the Liberation War were led by the vernacular elites, whose strength uplifted by the ethos of Bengali nationalism.

The essence of Bengali nationalism and the vernacular elite's re-appropriation of Bengal's folk tradition were even manifested in the cinematic landscape of East Pakistan. *Mukh o Mukhosh* (1956), the first feature-length sound film of East Pakistan (produced by

Abdul Jabbar Khan), was made in the Bengali language (Nasreen and Haq 2008: 40-43; Kabir 1979: 23). The film depicted nationalistic images of East Pakistan through its inclusion of the natural scenery of rural Bengal, local music and songs. Except for '120 cinema halls' in East Pakistan left mainly by their Hindu owners who had migrated to India during partition, there was no infrastructure located here, either in terms of technical expertise or filming equipment or establishments (Kabir 1979: 19). Moreover, both distributors and exhibitors opposed the proposal to make the film in East Pakistan during a meeting called by an official, Dr Abdus Sadeq in 1953 (ibid.: 22). They were driven by a fear of facing losses in their businesses which were fully dependent on importing Urdu, Indian and English movies to East Pakistan. However, openly they blamed their reluctance on a lack of resources, technical hands and finances: all real drawbacks for those hoping to initiate filmmaking in East Pakistan. One of them even called the weather conditions in East Pakistan unsuitable for filmmaking (ibid.: 22). Theater activist Abdul Jabbar Khan came out of the meeting declaring his commitment to making a film against the odds and later proved that films could be made in East Pakistan when his film *Mukh o Mukhosh* was released on 3 August 1956. This cinematic effort by Khan to some extent reflected the profound longing of the contemporary Bengali middle-class for a representation of Bengali national identity on-screen. Despite having many unavoidable technical faults, the film's historical role as the first Bengali feature film-and-sound production from East Pakistan is undeniable and significant.

Contemporary audiences' reaction to this film was very warm, as evidenced by Mofidul Hoque's review. He notes that *Mukh o Mukhosh* was the first film that attained the 'audience's overflowed joy for [a] Bengali film by [a] Bengali filmmaker' and thus it promoted the process of filmmaking in East Pakistan (cited in Qader 1993: 118). Kabir also says:

One cannot deny that *Mukh-o-Mukhosh* did not add much to our film art. But its appearance had been significant in many respects. It dispelled successfully the unfounded fear that film making had no future in East Bengal (1979: 23-24).

This film truly established the necessity for a studio in East Pakistan, which was then recognized by the government. In 1957, the 'East Pakistan Film Development Corporation Bill' was passed by the East Pakistan legislative assembly with the recommendation of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman as the Minister of the Ministry of Business and Industry of the province (Islam 2008: 16). Consequently, the EPFDC came into being in 1958. Nazir Ahmed, being the first Operative Director of the EPFDC, welcomed experienced Bengali filmmakers who had emigrated from Kolkata (Kabir 1979: 25-26).

The three opening Bengali movies supported by the EPFDC are: *Asiya*, *Matir Pahar* (The Mud Mountain) and *Akash ar Mati* (The Sky and the Soil), all released in 1959 and 1960. These films were not profitable, owing to the directors' lack of aesthetic and technical sense (Nasreen and Haq 2008: 44). Besides this, Urdu films from Lahore were more to the audiences' taste with their superior production values and appealing star casts. During this time, *Jago Hua Savera* (Day Shall Dawn, 1959), a film focusing on the fishermen's lives of East Bengal, by a non-Bengali director, A. J. Kardar, earned international recognition, receiving an award at the Moscow Film Festival. Despite being shot by a prominent British photographer Walter Lassally, *Jago Hua Savera* also failed to receive attention from the local audience. Many criticized its language choice, which incorporated both Urdu and Bengali languages, as 'peculiar' (Kabir 1979: 27). The subsequent period (1959-1965) saw some notable Bengali films: *Surjo Snan* (Sun Bath, 1962) by Salahuddin, *Kancher Deyal* (The Glass Wall, 1964) by Zahir Raihan, *Shutorang* (So, 1964) by Subhash Dutta, *Nodi o*

Nari (The River and the Woman, 1965) by Sadeq Khan. However, these films too failed to secure money and the audiences' attention.

Finding no other resort, Bengali film directors shifted their attention and started making Urdu films. Except for *Chanda* (1962) by Ehtesham, unfortunately, the Urdu films made in Dhaka were unsuccessful owing to the directors' poor grasp of Urdu; this language deficiency was evident in the dialogue and the accents of the actors and actresses. However, filmmaking efforts in the Urdu language by Bengali Muslims should not be seen as anti the Bengali nationalist venture. It was the demands of the period and the profit-making nature of the film industry that compelled them to make films in Urdu for some while. However, recent scholarship, conducted by Hoek, is inclined to excavate the past from a different perspective. She argues that many potential 'cross-wing collaborations and partnerships' were evident between the film-makers, performers or professionals involved in various sectors of the film production across the two halves of Pakistan during the 1960s (Hoek 2014b: 106). She also believes that in post-liberation Bangladesh, the process of writing the history of Bangladeshi cinema has, in most cases, deliberately neglected either to discuss or preserve the history of the Urdu films made in East Pakistan. Relevant to this point, I want to mention that in the second chapter of this thesis, I discuss the dynamics of forgetting and remembering that have led Bangladeshis to give greater recognition to those wartime films which promote their national interest. During the 1960s, however, the anticipated 'cross-wing' film culture did not encourage West Pakistani film-makers to make films in the Bengali language, with the exception of A. J. Kardar, and even he did not depend solely on Bengali, but rather used a mixture of Urdu and Bengali in his film. The steady decline of Urdu films from eleven films in 1966 to only two films in 1969 at the Dhaka studios shows the Bengali directors' aspiration to return to their own language (Kabir 1969: 45). In 1965, the Pakistani government first issued the order banning Indian films (Raju 2006: 124). This

ban surely reduced the pressure on the Bengali directors of East Pakistan who, until that point had to compete both with Bengali language films from India and the Urdu language films within their country.

Although the prospect of Bengali films was beginning to look like a fiasco, one Bengali film, *Roopban* (1965) by Salahuddin, surprisingly appeared as a savior, capturing a folk tale from the local theatrical form, *Jatra*.[12] This film was a runaway hit which broke East Pakistan's box-office records. Although many noticed that the film was an easy effort by its translation of popular *Jatra* into film (Kabir 1979: 28) and thus was able to earn money, the contribution of *Roopban* to the film industry was indisputable in many respects. This film helped encourage Bengali directors to explore different folk narratives in films. In the years immediately after its release, the production of Bengali language films rose sharply, finally overturning the supremacy of Urdu films. It was also the first movie that inspired rural audiences to come to the cinema theaters, who had previously considered watching films to be a sin. Although the film centered on a woman's story, that of a character named Roopban, it depicted oriental womanhood as idealized and as a stereotype, structured on purity (chastity) and self-sacrifice. The story revolves around the life of a twelve-year-old girl. In return for saving her father's life, Roopban agrees to marry a newly born baby, who is the son of King. After the marriage, her exile to the forest with her baby husband for twelve years highlights the sacrifice and suffering of womanhood. Combining tolerance, self-sacrifice, devotion, suffering and sexual purity, the characteristics established by *Roopban* continued to be the norm for female protagonists for years on Bangladeshi screens. This notion of female's purity has also been strongly maintained in the representation of

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[12] *Jatra* is musical epic and a traditional form of Bangla theater, made up of a combination of songs, dance, narration and dialogues. Initially, it centers on stories from *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata*, *Puranas* and the historical and mythical life of Muslim legendary characters. During the 19th century, it also began to incorporate many secular, moral and social themes, and became very popular among the rural masses of Bengal.

woman as mother-nation in the war films of Bangladesh that I will discuss in subsequent chapters. However, after the success of *Roopban*, a massive number of films, based on folk tales and myths, promptly appeared, such as *Behula* (1966), *Nayantara* (1967), *Nabab Sirajuddowla* (1967), *Sat Vai Champa* (Champa, the Seven Brothers, 1968), and *Arun Barun Kiron Mala* (1968). Overall, during this period, a new wave of Bengali 'modernism' flourished in various forms of art including films, reappraising and incorporating different folk traditions of the Bengal delta (Van Schendel 2009: 154-155).

The year 1970 was significant for Bangladeshi cinema. It was the time when the collective aspirations to construct a new national and cultural identity first appeared on Bangladeshi screens, in tandem with the contemporary political situation. Just a few years earlier, in 1966, a new wave of a militant movement had swept over Pakistan when Sheikh Mujibur Rahman of the Awami League announced the Six-Point Programme, a programme that demanded the autonomy of East Pakistan by charting a list of demands. The Six-Point, widely referred to as the Bengalis' Magna Carta, sprang from the secular consciousness of the Bengali people and the economic deprivation of East Pakistan. Slowly it cemented the struggle for a new nation. *Jibon Thekey Neya* (Glimpses of life, 1970), a film by Zahir Raihan, captures the crucial moment of Pakistani repression by presenting the national experiences and exploitation of Bengalis under the military dictatorship of Ayub Khan. I will analyze this film in a later section.

Drop frames: Women's position during the pre-Liberation period both in cinema and on the national agenda

Middle-class Bengali women started participating in several public spheres during this era, playing a significant role in protesting against the aggression of Pakistani rulers, although there was no particular 'women's question' on the nationalist agenda. Bengali nationalists'

attention and actions revolved almost exclusively around gaining the autonomy of the land although some efforts were also devoted to social reform. Despite this, middle-class Bengali women, regardless of their religion, appeared as figures of resistance through their participation in different cultural activities, and by wearing various traditional symbols and clothing. They used to ornament their foreheads with *teep*s (colored spots), better known as a custom for married Hindu women. They continued to sing *Rabindra sangeet* (Tagore song) in different public performances, even after Tagore song was forbidden in radio broadcasting by the Pakistani government. The authorities regraded it to be an Indian cultural element or Hindu practice. The active engagement of Bengali middle-class women in several processions, protests, meetings, fundraising events and student movements during the mid to late 1960s, reveals their awareness of the socio-political realities of the period.

The film industry also saw the entrance of a handful of middle-class Bengali women as performers. In 1970, one female film director, Rebecca, emerged as the first woman film director in the history of East Pakistan's Bengali language film, directing *Bindu Theke Britto* (From Dot to a Circle) (Qader 1993: 138-139). Until the early twentieth century, the participation of male Bengali Muslims in film-related activities was almost nil. Within a short time, in the second half of the twentieth century, to have even one woman, Rebecca, involved in cinema, and as a director no less, was a remarkable achievement. In fact, this era, being an age of 'cultural revolution', witnessed the participation of women in various cultural activities that derived from the secular nationalist consciousness of Bengali nationalism. The popular weekly magazine *Begum,* that was a forum for Bengali women, and the activities of the cultural organization, Chhayanot, instigated middle-class women's involvement in a range of cultural and social events. This contemporary wave created an atmosphere that made it possible for a woman to appear as a director, which, in independent Bangladesh, took a long time. After independence in 1971, the first feature film, *Asha*

Nirasha (Hopes and Despairs), by a female director, Rosy Afsari (known as Rosy Samad), was made only in 1986. For Rosy Afsari, it was relatively an easy venture as she had been a well-known actress in Bangladeshi cinema for a long time and was the former wife of Abdus Samad, who was an experienced director and cinematographer. In contrast, Rebecca, a woman from a lower middle-class family background, having no prior connections with the industry, faced greater challenges in making a film at a time when even male Bengali directors were struggling to carve out a position in Pakistan's film industry. Rebecca also took part in the Liberation War (Hayat 2014: 110). However, both national and cinema histories which discuss this era, often fail to include the role and experiences of women. For example, the *Bangladesh Cinema and National Identity*, by Zakir Hossain Raju, an international publication that writes an exhaustive history of Bangladeshi cinema does not mention Rebecca's name (2015). In the different historical discourses, which have been mostly overseen and written by males, we find the women of this period in footnotes. Thus women's real activities during this period in filmmaking or in nation making become invisible in the history; I term this mechanism as 'drop frames'. The 'drop frames' are very apparent in the films of the period, disappearing women's participation in the nationalist movement. Pre-liberation films made predominantly by male film directors did not include women's active involvement in the struggle for autonomy or their emerging progressive participation in the formation of the nation. So it is important to scrutinize how the films of the pre-liberation era have portrayed women. Alongside many other aspects, this will be an important concern in my analysis of the film *Jibon Theke Neya* in the following section. I will also look at how the film constructs gender differences and entangles women with the concept of nation during a crisis moment of history.

Close-up: a reading of *Jibon Theke Neya* (*Glimpses of life,* 1970)

Jibon Thekey Neya tells the story of a family where the dominant behavior of one woman makes others' life miserable. From her husband to the maid servant, everyone suffers from her violent behavior yet no one has the courage to revolt against her rule. Her power is signified by the dancing keyring attached to her sari, which rings like a bell to announce her progress through the house. Her husband, who is a lawyer and amateur singer, sings on the roof-top to escape her draconian regime but she cuts him off: he never reaches the end of his song. Her two unmarried brothers, Anis and Faruk, are also under an exclusive control. Anis is an advocate by trade, and even though he finances the entire family, he does not possess any power to challenge his sister. The younger brother, Faruk, is a student involved with leftist political organization. He is the only one who sometimes argues with his autocratic sister, but even he finally also succumbs to her regime.

The family members eventually find an outlet for their anger, making posters expressing their demands for equality and placing them on the walls of the house (Figure 2.1). The matriarch's response is to threaten to starve them, and force them to clean the walls of the house, erasing their own voices. It is her husband who ultimately identifies her keyring as the locus of her power; if he can decentralize the symbolic keys, have those shared out into other hands, the situation would change. To this end, he arranges Anis's marriage, and afterwards, Faruk also marries. They marry two sisters named Shathi and Bithi. The newlywed women are permitted to have some keys, and a share of the power.

Shathi and Bithi's brother Anwar is a political activist, repeatedly arrested for his dissent from the political administration. In his character, we see a version of the *Vivek*

character of *Jatra*.[13] He is a cipher for 'Bengali nationalism', glorifying the history, beauty

and tradition of Bengal. Faruk, the younger brother of the dictator lady, is also involved in

the movement demanding the economic and political autonomy of the land. In fact, the

struggle for freedom continues in the film on two parallel levels: one in the home, and the

other enacted on the streets by the Bengali masses, in which Anwar and Faruk also take part.

Figure 2.1 The posters appearing on the wall with the demands of other family members in which

they protest against the dominance of the tyrant in *Jibon Thekey Neya.*

In *Jibon Thekey Neya*, as the story progresses, the dictator tries to poison one of her

sisters-in-law in a bid to take back her power, for which crime she is ultimately imprisoned

and thus defeated. The film director, Zahir Raihan, has connoted the contemporary political

struggle under the dictatorship, and expressed the desire for autonomy both in private and

public life. Suffering from lack of basic rights to freedom of expression, the Bengalis were

exploited appallingly under the military dictatorship of Ayub Khan from1958 to 1969.

Against this backdrop *Jibon Thekey Neya* introduces a new trope that transforms personal

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[13] *Vivek* means conscience, and is a generic character of *Jatra* who appears in any scene to explain
the psychological manner or condition of a character or a sequence, mainly by singing. Sometimes,
Vivek warns the characters about their wrong doings. The features of *Vivek* reflect on many famous
characters created by Bengali writers. For example, the *Dada Thakur* character, created by
Rabindranath Tagore in his several plays, has the influence of *Vivek.*

stories into symbolic collective narratives. This metaphoric treatment allows the film to escape the government's outrage while mobilizing the Bengali masses, encouraging them to understand their oppression and move forward to freedom. Kabir says:

> In the film, through a metaphorically structured plot, Zahir Raihan not only epitomised the decade-long dictatorship of Pakistani militarist Ayub Khan but also provided the first filming expression to the rising tide of Bengali nationalism that became the living spirit behind the War of National Liberation less than a year later (1979: 45).

By presenting contemporary facts through a metaphoric form of fiction, the film portrays the identifiable shared narrative and history of the Bengalis. Applying Higson's account of national cinema, it can be said that *Jibon Thekey Neya* dramatizes the 'current fears, anxieties, conceits, pleasures and aspiration' (1995: 07) of the Bengalis and becomes the first example of 'national cinema' in Bangladesh, even before the independence of the country. Incorporating a melodramatic narrative with a theatrical style of acting and using 'stock characters', the film is not without its flaws (Kabir 1979: 45). However it created a profound patriotic sentiment and nation-building impulse in the minds of the Bengalis. The film displayed many cultural codes and memories, as well as suggesting several metaphors to make the Bengalis aware of their collective concerns, their deprivation and subjection under the military rule.

The title music begins with the words *a country*, *a family*, *a keyring*, *a movement*, *a film*, which appear on screen one by one as part of a slogan with the song *O amar shwapno jhora akul kora jonmovumi* ('O my dreamy motherland who made me devoted to her'). In different Bengali or Sanskrit plays, the *Sutradhar* (narrator) gives an introduction about the plot and the characters of the drama to the audience. The subtitles here encapsulate the spirit

of the *Sutradhar* and, like a dumb-show or chapter title, focus the audience's attention on these aspects of the film. This is also an echo of the placards used in the theater of German playwright and director, Bertolt Brecht.[14] It also reminds us of the fact that the director, Zahir Raihan, was a leftwing activist who initiated this cultural dialogue between the Brechtian style and the established Bengali cinematic form in a drive to create a new aesthetic or representation. As the slogans play out here, we are shown images of the characters in photographic negative, fading into positive definition. The effect of the negative is to give the impression of figures, part of a collective narrative, rather than of specific characters. The Bengali group identity as precedent over the individual narrative is highlighted by the first frame of the film proper, after the title music fades: we are presented with two hand-written Bengali words, *Amor Ekushey* ('Immortal twenty-first') on a poster. The following day is *Ekhushey February* and Anwar is preparing some posters to carry them in the *Provat Feri*, the morning procession of 21 February.[15] The Language Movement took place in 1952, as mentioned earlier in this chapter. On 21 February 1952, several Bengali-speaking students from East Pakistan were killed as they demanded that the Bengali language be the national language of Pakistan along with Urdu after the government announcement that Urdu would be the sole state language. Although initially, the government tried to suppress the demand by force, later, in 1956, it recognized both Bengali and Urdu as state languages, by adopting them to the constitution (Jahan 1997: 292).

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[14] In Brecht's coined epic theater, an actor/actress sometimes holds a placard to give an introductory idea of the scene, episode or a character.

[15] *Ekhushey February* or 21 February is observed as the Language Martyrs' Day or *Bhasha Shohid Dibosh* in Bangladesh since the Language Movement of 1952. UNESCO later announced this date as the 'International Mother Language Day' which is now celebrated annually worldwide. And *Provat Feri* is a kind of ritualistic annual procession for Bangladeshis to the *Shohid Minar* (Martyr Memorial). It has been held on the first hour of every 21 February since 1953 to pay homage to the language martyrs.

In the first framing of the film, by capturing the Bengali words *Amor Ekushey*, Raihan engages the Bengali audience with their emotive past and a ritual of their collective identity: signalling the Language Movement of 1952 and its commemoration in the present day. It was a powerful move by the filmmakers, coming out of the most oppressive period of dictatorial rule, to focus on the Bengali script. It acts, in fact, in audiences' minds, to boost patriotic resistance against the West Pakistani ruling authority. Here it is worth recalling Willem Van Schendel's observation about the strong influence of the Bengali alphabet in the different freedom struggles. In Van Schendel's words: 'Now it was not just the language itself that grew into a symbol of resistance and cultural pride. Each Bengali letter could be [effectively] used as a badge in the cultural guerrilla war (2009: 112).'

It needs to be noted that in this film the use of Bengali words takes place several times as a means to express the aspiration for freedom and to protest, at home and in the state at large. When the family members protest against their personal, domestic dictator, they do it in Bengali. Raihan knowingly employs the symbolic power of Bengali script as an emblem of 'resistance'.

When he has finished making the posters with which the film opens, Anwar calls his two sisters Bithi and Shathi to rehearse the song of *Provat Feri*. Bithi places the *ghomta* (extension of the sari over the head), and starts singing the song; Anwar and Shathi also join in with the words, *Amar bhaier rokte rangano Ekushey February/ Ami ki bhulite pari*? ('Can I forget the twenty-first February / incarnadined by the blood of my brother?').

The song plays on over images of a morning procession. Barefoot masses dressed in white, carrying flowers and placards, approach the *Shohid Minar* singing this song. The swelling of the song evokes the memories of *Bhasha Andolon* (Language Movement) in the audience, drawing their emotions to an event of collective mourning and the remembrance of self-dignity. The footage of the parade is intercut with a low-angle tracking-shot of the

Krishnochura (Caesalpinia pulcherrima/ Red bird of paradise) trees, moving at the same pace of the procession. The shot reveals that the *Krishnochura*s are bowing down, as if they are also mourning for the lost lives of the language martyrs. Anthony Smith argues that the role of memories is significant as they help maintain a nation's identity by uniting its members. He says: 'no memory, no identity; no identity, no nation' (1996: 383). *Jibon Thekey Neya* also inspires the collective memories of Bengalis by generating a sense of identity among them. In order to gesture to the vanished past, Raihan brings in this sequence of a set of codes – the Bengali language, *alponas* (geometric flowery design), the first song of February, *Shohid Minar*, *Krishnochura* trees, the bare feet of men and women, black badges on white dresses - which, in fact, signify the distinctiveness of Bengali culture and the ritualistic practices of *Ekushey February*. These codes are similar to the idea of 'bounded cultural objects' which are invented or practiced by the members of a nation to represent their nation's 'wholeness' or specificity, creating a sense of belonging among them (Hayward 2000b: 89). Here, in the procession, Raihan frames both Hindu women wearing *shakha*s (a white bracelet, worn by married Hindu Bengali women) and the faces of bearded Muslim men wearing *tupi* (prayer hats), to demonstrate the ritualized practices of the *Ekushey February* as common spheres for Bengalis, regardless of their religious identities.

The emotional empathy and imaginary bonds between the Bengali audiences and the *emotive past of Bhasha Andolon*, created in the procession scenes, is abruptly broken in the next sequence. This begins with a close tracking-shot of the symbolic keyring with its bunch of keys, fastened at the end of the tyrant's sari. The music also changes here to a sharply contrasting, high-pitched Western tune, accompanied by a trumpet. The audiences are jolted out of the symbolized nostalgia of the procession sequence by the entrance of the opposite and controlling force of the film: the domestic tyrant and her monopolizing power. This juxtaposition clearly leads the audience to consider the domestic narrative, dominated by the

tyrant, in terms of dictatorial Pakistani rule. It is another Brechtian method, an *alienation effect*, that forms the two conflicting/oppositional forces by making many contrasts. This technique helps the audience to be critically aware of the contrasting forces' purposes and postures. Then   a forceful denial of the *Provat Feri* of February is voiced loudly by this tyrannical character (we do not hear her name) as her younger brother Faruk returns barefoot from the processions:

Woman:	Where have you been in so early in the morning like a thief on bare feet?
Faruk:	Today is the *Ekhushey February*, I went to a *Provat Feri*.
Woman:	*Ekhushey February*? What type of thing is this?
Faruk:	Don't you know what *Ekhushey February* is?
Woman:	I don't need to know. It seems that like a barbarian you danced on bare feet down the whole street, didn't you? Listen, knowing that I can't tolerate this type of thing, why did you go there? Remember, if you go again there, I'll stop you studying!

Her attitude to the 21 February enhances her difference from the other Bengalis in the household. Perhaps to emphasize the lady dictator's isolation from the rest of the family, Raihan has not given her a name, unlike all the other characters within the film. This also identifies her with the totalizing power of a regime, rather than with the suffering mass of Bengali individuals. Her robust appearance is so distinct that any Bengali would be able to equate her with Field Marshal Ayub Khan. To enhance her metaphoric image as a dictator to the greatest dynamic effect, two consecutive sequences, conveying opposite aspects of her character, are shown one after the other. First, we see her as a *Banganari* (traditional woman of Bengal), serving her husband food; the shot begins with a backwards zoom from a *hat pakha* (hand fan), which she is waving towards her husband, generating a peaceful breeze towards him and towards the audience. Next, after a lapse in which her husband admits that

he once saw her as *dajjal* (wayward), the mask slips, and her real face is revealed. She throws a bell-metal bowl, creating an alarming diegetic cacophony, out of which begins a collage of shots of different kitchen objects flying in from different angles. During this sequence we also see a jumping koi fish, connoting life without water under the dictator's rule. In this way, Raihan uses objects and sounds to translate the tyrant's *dajjal* nature – which is much more sinister than the term might make it seem. The juxtaposition technique is employed several times in the film. For example, immediately after the death scene of Madhu, the caretaker at Anwar's home, we see the birth of Muktee, Faruk and Bithi's daughter, gesturing to a new hope. The juxtaposition of the two events: Madhu's death and Mukti's birth, reveals a message for the Bengalis that they should not to drown in their grief, but to look for a new hope, the new chance of freedom.

Jibon Thekey Neya, for most of it parts, fits into the genre of melodrama, as it mainly seeks to engage the audience's emotion through the use of music, songs and common codes. Following melodramatic mode, the film also employs gender relations, different idealized roles of men and women, and several issues within the family to explain the nation-state ideology. Again, Raihan employs the technique of using contrasts, offering disruptions to the fantasy- making nature of melodrama. Usually melodrama creates a 'reality effect' which is not real, rather an illusion of reality. Raihan extends the critical involvement of the audience by breaking the reality effect many times. To emphasize one of the most dramatic moments, when the keyring shifts to Shathi and then Bithi's hand after their marriages, Raihan utilizes freeze frames, denying the flow or logic of continuity editing. This technique is also used to highlight the profound ecstasy of their married life. By avoiding the conventional Bengali film style, that overtly uses lip-synched song-and-dance sequences for constructing love and fantasies, Raihan uses a few freeze frames and some zoom-in camera operations to illustrate the love sequence of the couples. The sequence also includes soft background music.

'Hate' is introduced by way of the same cinematic techniques as 'love': by freeze-frames with extreme close-ups of the tyrant. Her furious gaze intercuts with freeze-frames of the lovers, Shathi and Anwar, and Bithi and Faruk. (Figures 2.2 and 2.4). The close-up shots (one of which is 'Figure 2.3') illustrate the gaze of the tyrant and deny the perspective of a conventional narrative film in which cinematic images solely position the audience with the authority to gaze. The antipathy offered by the gaze of the tyrannical lady distracts the audience from their conventional pleasurable viewing of love scenes, driving a critical distance between the audience and the narrative. In a Brechtian fashion, Raihan, requires more responsible ways of viewing of the audience.

Figure 2.2   **Figure 2.3**   **Figure 2.4**

Figure 2.2, 2.3 and 2.4 The juxtaposition of freeze frames to depict and contrast the notions of love and hate in *Jibon Thekey Neya*.

However despite the recurrent critical distances, *Jibon Thekey Neya* is a melodrama with its idealized and polarized characterizations, use of songs, 'stylized' acting and goal-oriented narrative structure. At the same time, it also appeals to the patriarchal nationalistic sentiment which inspires and invites male members of the audience to fight or die for the nation. The mother icon is employed to personify the nation. From the title music to the end credits, there is an attempt to reinforce an anti-colonial thrust and resistance by the Bengalis. This is done by positioning the mother as the image of the nation invaded by the enemy, the Pakistani dictator. And the wishes and actions to free the mother nation are executed by men. The nationalist discourse of referring to the country and soil as a mother is articulated in

Anwar's dialogue. When he arrives in their village with Shathi, Bithi and Madhu, at some point, Madhu becomes annoyed with Anwar for his excessive patriotic sentiment and love for the country. Anwar replies:

> Anwar: Madhu, this earth is mine. This is my country's earth. You, I and all of us were born on this earth [...] The earth is as adorable and sacred as my mother. I don't want to allow this golden earth of my golden land be violated and that's the reason why I always speak about my country, about the earth of my land.

Just after this speech, Anwar kisses the soil. Then Anwar, Sathi and Bithi sing emotionally the following famous song by Tagore which heightens powerfully the image of sublime mother-nation:

> *Amar shonar Bangla, ami tomai bhalobashi,* (My Bengal of gold, I love you)
> *Chirodin tomar akash, tomar bathash, amar prane bajay bashi* (Eternally your skies, your air play a tune on my heart as if it were a flute)
> *O ma, Fagune tor amer bone ghrane pagol kore,* (In spring, O mother mine, the fragrance from your mango groves makes me wild with joy,)
> *Mori hai, hai re* (Ah, I die in pleasure.)
> *O ma, aghrane tor bhora khete ami ki dekhechi modhur hashi* (In autumn, O mother mine, in the fully grown paddy fields, I have seen your sweet smiles) […]

With its passionate sounds, rhythms and melody, the song is followed by visuals of the beautiful landscape of golden Bengal. By capturing a group of wide-angle shots, Raihan places the characters in diverse compositions in the natural landscape of Bengal. The song sequence connotes the ritualized gaze and devotion of the offspring of Bengal to the beauty of their motherland. To stir nationalistic sentiment, Raihan selects a powerful song that became the national anthem of Bangladesh after independence. Eventually, throughout the

visuals, narrative, songs, sound and compositions of the film, Raihan's aspirations to create a Bengali identity and enhance the perception of Bengali nationalism are very apparent.

Although the narrative of *Jibon Thekey Neya* worships the mother image as the nation, we do not see any representation of revolutionary women in the film. The sequences of street processions, movements and protests inside a prison cell are featured solely as male spaces (Figure 2.5); we do not see a single woman there. Women are restricted to the domestic arena where they appear in the traditional roles of woman as sister, wife and mother, fighting with each other to get the ultimate power within a household. The female protagonists, Shathi and Bithi, are constructed with aspects of the middle-class, modernized Bengali woman, acquiring university education, permitted to sing Tagore songs and allowed to participate in cultural events and festivals. After marriage, all their wishes and efforts are devoted to their home. As Partha Chatterjee observes, Indian (Bengali) middle-class women of the late nineteenth-century were provided with an education to acquire the necessary skill for being a perfect female in the space of the home (1990: 247-49). Education for women was seen by many as a means of developing 'womanly virtues' in them (247). In *Jibon Thekey Neya* we see almost the same cultural dynamics in the construction of the middle-class women. Occasionally, they emerge from the home and join a national event such as *Provat feri* of 21 February, where they carry flowers and sing. However, they never participate in the critical affairs of the nation.

The anti-colonial struggle is portrayed as an event glorifying the participation and sacrifice of men from different classes, in which Anwar and Faruk fight bravely and Madhu dies for the mother nation. In contrast, the females' roles revolve around the home and their greatness is judged by the quality of their maintenance of the home-space, which is further underlined in the dialogue between the husband of the 'tyrant' and a matchmaker. Due to an

unfulfilled urge to have a good wife who he believes only can make the home peaceful, the lawyer husband expresses his resentment. He blames the matchmaker for being dishonest in not finding him a good wife in the manner of the old Bengali saying: *Shangshar shukher hoi romonir guney* (By the virtue of woman the domestic life becomes happy). So, the ways in which women are constructed in *Jibon Thekey Neya*, firstly in the conception of the mother nation and secondly, in traditional roles, both follow a patriarchal paradigm.

Figure 2.5 A street procession scene in *Jibon Thekey Neya*, led exclusively by men.

On this point one needs to consider the context of the period in which this film was made. During the shooting it faced attempts by the authorities to stop production (Kabir 1989c: 21). Therefore, facing a hostile and conflicting situation, Raihan revised the story line and had to improvise shooting on set on many occasions. The authorities' opposition to the film reappeared at the time of its certification for exhibition. The Dhaka branch of the Central Board of Film Censors delayed issuing its 'U' (Universal) certificate, while officials of the Film Censors initially recommended that it obtain further permission from the higher authorities in Rawalpindi, an administrative city in West Pakistan (ibid.: 21). Even after many tickets had been pre-sold for its planned release on 10 April 1970, it did not receive the necessary clearance on time. The delay in its obtaining screening permission triggered a

spate of fierce protests among the audience. The Governor General had to involve himself in this matter, arranging for its urgent release in the wake of the protest (Qader 1993: 138). The authorities finally issued the 'U' certificate on 11 April 1970. Although the Pakistani authorities could not stop the film's release in the face of mass protests, they took their revenge immediately after the Liberation War. It is alleged that Zahir Raihan's disappearance on 30 January 1972 was caused by local collaborators as part of Pakistani army's mission to kill the intellectuals of Bangladesh that had been executed so devastatingly on a mass scale in December 1971. Rainhan's brother Shahidullah Kaiser, an eminent Bangladeshi writer and intellectual, was also a victim of the killing by the Pakistani forces during the war.

To summarize, *Jibon Thekey Neya* strategically places the national situation in a family plot under dictatorial rule and serves as a model for political filmmaking for Bengalis. The film testifies to the fact that a film can be simultaneously poetic and political, symbolic and realistic, domestic and national. By exploring different aspects of narrative filmmaking, Raihan employs an allegorical style to portray the history, memories, values and the existing political scenario of pre-Liberation Bangladesh on a cinematic canvas. His goal was to strengthen the identity of Bengalis during a tumultuous period of colonial repression and to inspire them to move forward to achieve freedom and to 'glide [them] into a limitless future' (Anderson 1991: 12). However, inclusive Raihan may have been with his focus on men from a variety of social classes, the director nonetheless maintains a distance between the movement and Bengali women.

Tracking shots and the cuts: the route of nationalism after 1971 and the censorship procedure

After independence, Bangladesh incorporated nationalism, socialism, democracy and secularism as the basic four principles of the constitution. It stated precisely the concept of

'Bengali nationalism' in Article 9: 'the unity and solidarity of the Bengali nation, which deriving its identity from its language and culture, attained sovereign and independent Bangladesh through a united and determined struggle in the war of independence, shall be the basis of Bengali nationalism' (cited in Mohsin 2003: 91). General Ziaur Rahman, as the president of Bangladesh from 1976 to 1981, later initiated the process of Islamization by removing secularism from the Constitution and including in its place a clear loyalty to the values of Islam. He also amended Article 6 of the constitution, forming Bangladeshi Nationalism, thus replacing Bengali nationalism during his regime (Mookherjee 2015: 37). In 1988, through the Eighth Amendment, General H.M Ershad declared Islam as the state religion. In recent years, the Awami League-led alliance, as a pro-Liberation ruling coalition government, brought about constitutional change in the Fifteenth Amendment Act, 2011. The constitution re-enshrines 'secularism' but keeps Islam as the state religion. It also defines the concept of identity in Article 6: 'the people of Bangladesh shall be known as Bangalees [Bengalis] as a nation and citizens of Bangladesh shall be known as Bangladeshis' (cited in Ahmed 2012: n.p.).

This state initiative of establishing nationalism as 'Bengalis' was again criticized by different political leaders and members of civil society. They claim that it may hinder cultural harmony and diversity, excluding different ethnic groups from the state-declared 'Bangalee' (Bengali) national identity.

It should be noted that the term 'Bengali', signalling a secular feature, has always been assumed as the hidden and imagined strength for Bangladeshis in their identity formation, whether or not it is assured or fixed by the state. This assertion is powerfully evidenced by a survey, conducted in 2004 by the BBC Bengali Service, which canvassed its twelve million listeners in Bangladesh and eastern India, to determine the 'Greatest Bengali of All Time' (Mustafa 2004: n.p.). The result of the survey shows that Bangladeshi identity is

interchangeable with the term 'Bengali' by placing Shekh Mujibur Rahman as the 'Greatest Bengali of All Time'. Rahman, who is regarded as the architect of independent Bangladesh and the first prime minister of the Bangladeshi nation state, easily beats Nobel prize-winning poet and playwright Rabindranath Tagore, the author of the national anthems of Bangladesh and India, into second place (ibid.: n.p.). It is worth recalling here that in British India the nationalist political leadership was dominated by upper-caste Hindus: in cultural and economic affairs of the period, Muslim Bengalis were marginal to the 'early process of middle-class formation' (Sarkar 2008: 4). Consequently, the idea of 'Bengali' identity was promoted then by linking it with a 'Hindu-centered view of nation' (Chatterjee 1999: 113). By contrast, at present, the term 'Bengali' is increasingly becoming a marker of identity for Bangladeshis, cross-pollinating with their Muslim identity.

A national identity is not an unchanged concept and it is indeed a construction. As Andrew Higson argues, 'national identity is by no means a fixed phenomenon, but constantly shifting, constantly in the process of becoming' (1995: 04), Bangladesh also has gone through many changes in a quest for its national identity that has involved a selective appropriation of its ideology, tradition, history and political practices at different times. In the pre-and post-independence era, religion and language both appeared as the most important elements in the identity formation of Bangladeshis. Bangladeshi cinema, as a cultural organ, also participates in the construction of national identity following the dominant perception of nation and its cultural values. As Higson puts it, national cinema incorporating a more 'inward-looking' vision constitutes 'its relationship to an already existing national political, economic and cultural identity […] and set of traditions' (1989: 42). The film censorship procedure in Bangladesh includes a code and rules aimed at maintaining the nation's cultural, moral and political values and interests. Censorship is a mandatory process in Bangladesh prior to a film's release and screening, implemented

according to the Bangladesh Censorship of Films Rules 1977 (with subsequent amendments) by the Bangladesh Film Censor Board.[16] The eight instructions, formulated by the Ministry of Information in the Code for Censorship of Films in Bangladesh, 1985, carried out by the Bangladesh Film Censor Board during the process of examining a film, place identity issues right at the beginning, in a position of strength. These instructions list the reasons why a film may not be released. The first two subheadings of the first instruction state that a film will be regarded as unsuitable for public exhibition if it ' (a) Brings into contempt Bangladesh or its people, its tradition, culture, custom and dress. (b) Tends to undermine the integrity or solidarity of Bangladesh as an independent state.'[17] The rest of the subheadings of the first instruction include issues to do with security or law and order. The other instructions cover orders and cautions about international relations, religious susceptibilities, immorality or obscenity, bestiality, crime, plagiarism, etc. The Censor Board also assures the inclusion of the sound track of the national anthem behind the visual of a waving flag of Bangladesh in each film at the beginning. Audiences usually stand during the period of the screening of the national anthem, expressing their tribute to the nation. It is, in fact, a cultural practice for Bangladeshis to stand on any occasion in which the national anthem is being played or sung.

Higson quotes from James Donald's: 'a nation does not express itself through culture: it is culture that produces the nation' (1995: 06). Bangladeshi cinema, as a form of cultural expression of the Bangladeshi nation-state, is also directly or indirectly bound to negotiate with the process of constructing a collective consciousness of nation and nationhood, even by the imposed regulation and ideology of the institution. However, not all films made in Bangladesh contribute to the construction of Bangladeshi nation by upholding

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[16] See 'The Bangladesh Censorship of Films Rules 1977' at: <http://www.bfcb.gov.bd/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=161&Itemid=151>

[17] See 'The Code for Censorship of Films in Bangladesh, 1985' at: <http://www.bfcb.gov.bd/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=162&Itemid=152>

its collective aspirations and values. It would be simplistic to assume that because these regulations exist they are followed outright, either by film-makers or by the Film Censor Board itself, especially given claims that the Board is a 'body created to serve the values of the ruling class' (Mokammel 1999: 31). Under its bureaucratic system and power good films often face obstacles to their release. War films by independent film directors have, on many occasions, faced a particularly antipathetic attitude by the Board which caused a delay in certification or resulted in their being ordered to cut parts of the films that conflict with the ideology of the existing government. In chapter three and chapter four, I return to this point by giving further examples. Moreover, since the 1980s, the boom of plagiarized films and films with violence and obscene sequences have proven the poor performance of the Censor Board. Many have even demanded the abolition of this system of film censorship, the setting up of a gradation system or that the Censor Board should be made an autonomous body rather than a government-owned institution (Nasreen and et al. 2008: 167).

In focus: The contemporary Bangladeshi film industry and film culture

The Bangladeshi film industry, known as Dhallywood, is based in Dhaka and influenced by the two words 'Dhaka' and 'Hollywood'. The expression 'Dhallywood' may suggest an understanding of the inevitable dominance of Hollywood over Bangladeshi films, as Hollywood films control the dynamics of most world cinema. Moreover, Hollywood films have been permitted to be exhibited in the cinema theaters and also on the state-owned television channel since the independence of Bangladesh. According to Higson, 'Hollywood […] has […], of course, for many years been an integral and naturalised part of the national culture, or the popular imagination, of most countries in which cinema is an established entertainment form' (1989: 39). In the case of Bangladesh, however, the influence of Hollywood films has not been so commanding. Some aspects of the industry follow the

standardized commercial structure of Hollywood. For example, the film's duration, censorship procedure, studio-based film production system and the practices of traditional film exhibition are all areas that follow, more or less, the Hollywood pattern. Yet unlike their Hollywood colleagues, filmmakers in Bangladesh don't have many options if they wish to work with private studios. Most have to depend on the government-run Bangladesh Film Development Corporation (BFDC). However, this cultural mode of production sustains a local character 'almost ignoring the Hollywood film industry' (Raju 2006: 123). As the literacy rate is low in Bangladesh, Hollywood films, which are in English, have never developed much in the way of mass appeal. Artistically, if not structurally, therefore, Bangladeshi cinema has been able to step outside the Hollywood model. On the contrary, Indian films (from Tamil and Hindi, to popular Bengali and art house film productions) have been very influential on Bangladeshi film culture. The tastes and aesthetic choices of both filmmakers and audiences were in many cases, as I will discuss shortly, shaped by the model of films from India. Nonetheless, Bangladeshi cinema has also always been targeted towards local, Bengali-speaking audiences; it has further developed a number of stylistic conventions of its own, and a specific local infrastructure of production, distribution and exhibition.

In independent Bangladesh, cinema started its journey by focusing on the epic episode of the Liberation War. A great many war films were produced within the first five years after independence. However, both the production and contents of war films during the early period and in subsequent years, have been influenced and shaped by the contemporary political ambiance. In the subsequent chapters, I will discuss the war films made during and after the Liberation War in greater detail.

During the 1970s, popular films were based on romantic and social plots, regarded as family-drama. The common contents of these films are middle-class life and its values, valorization of the idea of family, romance and conflict between different social classes.

Love affairs between two classes, such as rich and poor or two localities such as urban and rural usually boosted the main tension of these films. Commercially successful films of this era are: *Obujh Mon* (Innocent Mind, 1972), *Alor Michil* (Procession of Light, 1978), *Lathial* (1975) (*Sujon Shokhi)* (1975), *Sareng Bou* (The Captain's Wife, 1978), *The Father* (1979). During this era, *Surjokonna* (The Daughter of the Sun, 1976) by Alamgir Kabir endeavored to go against the wave of the period. Elsewhere, I assert it as an exceptional, modern film which portrays the suppressed desires and unconscious of the middle-class through an appropriation of Freudian psychoanalysis (Akhter 2015). The desire for women's emancipation has been articulated metaphorically in *Surjokonna*. However, the film was not popular at the box office and failed in business terms.

The period of domination by middle-class audiences came to an end with the increase of violence and the introduction of erotic contents that crept in alongside Bollywood-inspired plot-lines in the 1980s. Moreover, a few years earlier, the assassination of the prime minister, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, and his family, in 1975, ushered in an uncertain situation for democracy at state level that led to military rule which lasted for nearly 16 years. The political violence also inspired the tendency to splatter blood across movie screens. The films of the 1980s mostly emerged as social-action films. Many claim that a film from the 1970s called *Rongbaj* (Gangster*, 1973) by Johirul Haq initiated the trend for action movies which focused on a *mastan* (lout) character as the protagonist (Nasreen et al. 2008: 57). However, I would say *Rongbaj* is a social-action film and not a copy of Indian films, despite its centering on a *mastan*. In contrast, many films made since the late 1970s started copying the screenplays, dialogue, titles, music and even lyrics of Indian films, leading Kabir to categorize them as 'plagiarised films' (Kabir 1979: 61-62). During this era, the Bangladeshi film industry also saw some social films based on Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay's stories and novels. *Devdash* (1982), *Chandranth* (1984) and *Shuvo Da*

(1984) are among those films which earned a comparatively good amount of money and audience share. However, neither the action films or the social films portrayed strong characterizations of women. The action films are hero-based; women are there either to add erotic fantasies or have roles in relation to the hero. Although, in some cases, the social films center on women, most, however, predominantly portray them with idealized feminine features as suffering and sacrificing good Bengali women or wives. In the 1990s, the industry saw some romantic films regarded as *teen-age love stories*. These films, however, are also action-based and copies of Bollywood films. *Chandni* (1991) by Ehtesham and *Keyamot Thekey Keyamot* (1993) by Shohanur Rahman Sohan are the record breaking films in this category.

The middle-class audience's exposure to Bollywood films began in the 1980s, when the Bangladesh government started importing video players. These films not only affected the standards and artistic contents of Bangladeshi films but also attracted middle-class viewers with their huge circulation via many non-theatrical means of viewing. Home entertainment systems, such as VCR, VCD and DVD players, satellite and cable networks, and the internet are the main media or resources that have gradually been dissuading middle-class viewers from going to cinemas to watch Bangladeshi films. In addition, the business of pirated VCDs and DVDs is mushrooming in Bangladesh. Consequently, Bollywood movies ranging from the latest release to older hits are available almost anywhere in the country. Bangladeshi viewers are also able to consume Bollywood content around the clock from nearly 60 Indian cable channels. The consumption of Bollywood has left its mark on every sphere of Bangladeshi popular culture. Fashion, lifestyle, language, festivals, events, music listening habits, posters and print media are adorned with Bollywood stars, tunes and styles. Social films have been slowly disappearing from the industry, replaced by extremely violent action movies as the main strand of popular cinema since the beginning of the 2000s. In

addition to this violent sensationalism, Dhallywood films have begun to incorporate uncensored, sexually explicit scenes and obscene clips, known as 'cut-pieces' during this time. Hoek explains the context and the reasons behind the emergence of such illegal clips in her book *Cut Pieces: Celluloid Obscenity and Popular Cinema of Bangladesh* (2014a). She writes:

> The cut-piece sells movies in the context of the competitive contemporary media landscape of South Asia that includes satellite television, Hong Kong films, DVDs, "Bollywood", and telefilms (ibid.: 5).

The concerning factors due to which cut-pieces began appearing in Dhallywood included the entrance and availability of global entertainment through different media; the absence of middle-class viewers in the cinema theaters; the producers' lack of enthusiasm for films' quality; their poor investment in film production; and the emergence of some half-or-less-educated directors. The insertion of cut-pieces was aimed at earning money by attracting a working class audience, mainly from the villages.

Although there has been a state ban on exhibiting or releasing Indian films since 1965, during the India-Pakistan border conflict, which has continued even in the post-independence era, the dominance of Bollywood over Bangladeshi films is indisputable. Stephen Crofts, therefore, labels Bangladeshi popular cinema as the 'other entertainment cinema', including the genres of melodrama, comedy and action thriller, and ultimately an imitation of Indian cinema (Crofts 2000: 06). Tanvir Mokammel characterizes Bangladeshi popular cinema as a 'poor man's copy of the Bollywood *masala* films', that follows the formula by offering a mixture of different elements in a single film such as song, dance, action, melodrama, romance, fantasy and comedy (1999: 29). In recent years, first in 2010

and then in 2015, the government attempted to withdraw the ban briefly by releasing some Indian films. However, this was opposed fiercely by the actors and producers of the local industry (*The Guardian* 2015, 29 January) and the ban was re-imposed. On the other hand, the distributors and cinema hall owners, who would benefit from the screening of Bollywood films, welcomed this effort. They argue that they are experiencing huge losses as viewers are not going to the cinema to watch substandard Dhallywood films which has resulted in a massive decline in the number of movie theaters. In 2000, there were 1600 cinema halls in Bangladesh, which reduced to 600 in 2010 (Alam 2010: n.p.). Most of the popular cinemas, such as Shamoly, Gulistan, Naj, Lion, Star, Shabistan, and Tazmahal have already disappeared, becoming multi-storey apartments. In addition, the number of films released has dropped to 60 in 2010 from 100 in the 1990s (Ethirajan 2011: n.p.). The dispute between the production and distribution arms of the film industry is therefore clear.

However, despite the ban on Bollywood films, which has continued upon facing fierce protests, these films are an integral and aggressive part of the Bangladeshi film industry and its consumption. The industry, in many respects, has failed to become an economically viable or a cultural institution. By incorporating different elements from Bollywood – song, unrealistic dance sequences, action, melodrama, romance, fantasy, colorful costume patterns, stories and narrative formats – Bangladeshi popular cinema is becoming a hybrid form of cinematic representation.

At this point, it is necessary to look back at those strands of Bangladeshi cinema that did not always follow the Bollywood lead. The most commercially successful movies that have broken box-office records in Bangladesh are *Roopban* (1965), before the Liberation period, and *Beder Meye Josna* (Josna, the Daughter of a Snake-Charmer, 1989), from the post-Liberation era. Both films constitute distinctive genera and industrial responses from Bangladesh, and both are based on Bangladeshi folk narratives. Another interesting aspect is

that the both films center on female characters, Roopban and Josna. Despite their central positioning in the films they are portrayed stereotypically as the idealized version of woman who always sacrifices and suffers.

In 1989, *Beder Meye Josna* earned a profit of Taka 150 million while its production cost was only Taka 2.5 million (Islam 2010).[18] Its record-breaking success influenced the other prominent Bengali-speaking film industry, in Kolkata, to remake it for their audience. In Bangladesh, remake productions also mainly feature folk movies. So, folk stories underpin the particular generic narrative facet of Bangladesh that satisfy the appetite of local audiences, synthesizing elements from the folk-theater, *Jatra*. This traditional performance offers very stylized acting which blends many theatrical elements from the East and the West. The use of monologues, colorful costumes, props, Western musical instruments, character makeup, lighting effects, and act and scene divisions are among those Western elements which have diffused slowly into *Jatra*. Nevertheless, it still displays the distinctive theatrical form of Bangladesh with its song-and-dance based musical ensembles and stylized performance. The overwhelming popularity of *Jatra* has influenced many directors of commercial films in texturing their films and inflecting the narrative content of Bengali cinema. Not only popular films but also some famous art films like *Titas Ekti Nadir Nam* (A River Named Titas, 1973) and *Surya Dighal Bari* (The Ominous House, 1979), *Matir Moina* (The Clay Bird, 2003) display the far-reaching influence of *Jatra*. For example, these films structure a narrative plot or incorporate a linear story-telling approach, frequently use local music to describe the story, scene or a character's emotional features and select folk-based stories as a notion of collectiveness.

Over the last four decades since independence, the Bangladeshi film industry and popular film culture have explored many modes of expression. Some Bangladeshi film

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[18] Taka (BDT) is Bangladeshi currency. 1 BDT is equivalent to 0.0125 USD in 2016

historians are inclined to categorize films according to their subject matter. For instance, Aminul Islam classifies the genres of Bangladeshi cinema according to their central themes, such as: Liberation War-based films, literature-based films, social films, action-based films, folk-based films, children's films, miracle or fantasy films, comedies, biographies and mass movement and mass consciousness strengthening films (2008: 109-136). Alamgir Kabir has suggested four broad groups of Bangladeshi films: war films, non-plagiarised films of conventional format, plagiarised films and off-beat films (1979, 57).

Another prevalent form of classification is the simple division between mainstream and alternative films. Mainstream or popular films are also known as industrial cinema or studio cinema, surviving in parallel with the formulaic film format of Hollywood. These films are broadly dependent on producers, studios, and star-centered stories. In the above discussion, I have already taken a cursory glimpse at the chief characteristics of popular Bangladeshi films. In contrast, alternative films in Bangladesh follow an independent form of production and distribution, made completely outside the mainstream studio system. They are often, if not always, anti-establishment, both in terms of contents and in their mode of production. The alternative film movement in Bangladesh began in the 1980s and earned the localised vocabulary, 'Short Film'.

Since the beginning, the 'Short Film' movement has been devoted to the formation of national identity. These films contain a sense of 'imagined community' by focusing on cultural heritage, myths, memory and the spirit of the Liberation War. The prevailing national political climate, controlled by the military dictatorship that promoted Islamic fundamentalism during the 1980s, provided a context in which alternative film directors emerged. Initially, they employed an allegorical cinematic expression to articulate the 'identity question' linked to the ethos of the Liberation War as a means of protesting against the state. Over the years, they have experimented with different forms of representation and

themes, but have chosen the Liberation War as a powerful and recurrent theme of their films. The notable alternative films, for example, *Agami* (The Time Ahead, 1984), *Hooliya* (Wanted, 1985) *Muktir Gaan* (Song of Freedom, 1995), *Matir Moina* (The Clay Bird, 2002) are all based on the Liberation War. In chapter four, I will elaborate on these, discussing their aesthetics and dynamics in portraying the Liberation War, women and nation.

Projecting the war films as national belongings

To save the industry from decay, the late Tareque Masud, who is regarded as one of the great film directors of Bangladesh, said that films on the theme of the Liberation War could not only create new possibilities for Bangladeshi cinema but also could bring back the audience who had left the theaters with resentment (Masud 2012: 134-135). The Liberation War is the singular defining event of Bangladeshi history and its national identity, and this centrality is no different in creating the concept of a national cinema for Bangladesh.

The Liberation War of Bangladesh is noted as a war in which the expected degree of freedom was total and complete (*sharbik mukti*) in every aspect (Mamun, 2000: 13). This aspiration to acquire 'completeness' led to an invigoration of almost every ambit of the socio-cultural life of Bangladesh after independence. Simultaneously, art and literarature vigorously embraced the drive towards newness. Within this zeitgeist, the language of cinema also moved forward to touch the new wave. Kabir explains this enthusiasm brought by the war to the film industry of Bangladesh by addressing the films as 'a new kind of cinema' for Bangladesh – a cinema that brings new form and content in comparison to the pre-Liberation films (1989: 52). The audience also responded with great interest to these films. Consequently, different genres of film, such as documentaries, docu-fiction, full-length commercial dramatic films, experimental films and short-length films have been

produced on the theme of the Liberation War, during and after the war right up to the present day.

It is also evident that in other countries national cinema or a new wave of cinema has emerged in the aftermath of a traumatic national event like war or a prime political catastrophe. In Russia, after the Revolution of 1917, cinema reached a new level, employing film as a tool for social change. The same trend can be observed in Italian cinema, formed in the aftermath of the Mussolini era. In Cuba, the birth of a new cinema resulted from the Cuban Revolution. In African countries, particularly in Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco, the articulation of the demand for freedom and sovereignty resulted in films documenting their versions of the war of independence. The same impulse is evident in Bangladeshi cinema, although explications of the Liberation War in other art forms have found more traction. Nevertheless, by exploring the ethos of the war and the attendant traumas of conflict, Bangladesh started its cinematic journey, with specific intent of manifesting this event as its supreme cultural expression of national memory and pride. If 'national cinema depends upon "an affirmation of self-identity"' (Higson 1995: 07) and 'revolve[s] around an intertextuality to which one attributes a certain historical weight' (Rosen 2006: 17), the Liberation War is considered as the unique historical chapter for Bangladeshi film directors, both within the mainstream industry and the alternative film movement. They employed this historical event to represent a national experience of belonging and national identity beyond race, religion, cast and class. Given that the Liberation War provides Bangladeshi film directors with a major theme for filming that is linked with the identity question, they have returned to this episode of Liberation War again and again for their films' themes and contents. Film scholars are inclined to categorize films about the Liberation as 'healthy' films (Hoek 2014a: 65).

However, not all films about the Liberation War are faithful to its values, and not all of them support, or speak to an interest in, the Bangladeshi national identity. The term

'nation' has been re-defined in Bangladesh several times. Therefore, in order to read films about the Liberation War, it is also imperative to understand the conditions in which they were made, their relation to contemporary national political culture, and the place of the Liberation War in the nation-building agenda of the Bangladeshi nation state at different periods in its history.

Conclusion

The concept of national cinema is linked essentially to the notion of a distinctive national space that is supported by a state to resist external influences by affirming national self-identity and consciousness. Bangladesh, however, as a developing country has so far been incompetent in producing an infrastructure capable of maintaining the notion of nation on its screens or assuring artistic merit. Again, it must be noted that unique events within Bangladesh's turbulent history, such as the Language Movement of 1952 and the Liberation War, contribute to a strong sense of national identity amongst the country's inhabitants. Even with a lack of institutional support, efforts to sustain and cohere national identity in film do not disappear; rather the Liberation War emerges as the most defining source of collective pride on the Bangladeshi screen again and again. In this chapter, I have sketched the contextual background and the present conditions of Bangladeshi national cinema. This will provide a broad cultural frame of reference by which to analyze the war films of Bangladesh. In the following chapters, I will study the changing cinematic mechanism of war films, how this body of films reshapes the national identity, the ethos of the Liberation War and the images of women during the war at different periods. At the same time, I aim to scrutinize the reasons behind such portrayals.

CHAPTER TWO

Framing Pain as Spectacle: The Aesthetics of Wartime Films of Bangladesh[*]

Covering the films made during the Liberation War, this chapter aims to discover the language and aesthetics used by films on the Liberation War of Bangladesh. The traumatic suffering, human rights abuses against the Bangladeshis and their revolt against the Pakistani army were the subject of numerous documentary films during the period. Both local and international filmmakers recorded the unfolding events of the war. Scrutinizing the different interests and perspectives of various directors from the local and international arenas, this chapter considers how wartime films have tackled and negotiated the issues of atrocity, memory, and witness. In addition, I closely analyze the film *Stop Genocide* (1971) by the Bangladeshi film director, Zahir Raihan (1935-72). *Stop Genocide* is acclaimed as the most authentic and influential visual text in shaping cultural memories of the war. Along with its third cinema aesthetics, I look at its re-inscription of the gender stereotypes of nationalist struggle. I also pay attention to the complex relationships between language, culture, ethics, identity and other discourses related to violence and suffering.

On 1 August 1971, Ravi Shankar and George Harrison's 'The Concert for Bangladesh', which was staged at New York's Madison Square Garden, drew world attention to the Liberation War of Bangladesh. Documentary footage of the traumatic suffering and human rights abuses of Bangladeshi refugees inflicted by the Pakistani army, which had compelled the refugees to flee to the borders of India, was projected from behind the stage during the interval between each musical set. This footage of 'refugee camps, starving children, and rotting corpses' acted as a shocking reminder of the purpose of the show for the

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[*] An earlier version of this chapter has been appeared in the *Bangladesh Film Archive* Journal (Akhter 2014d).

audience (Heckman 1971: n.p.). The aim of the concert was to raise funds for the refugees. Its blanket coverage by different television channels and print media made it possible for international audiences to become aware of the atrocious suffering of the refugees.

However, the images and songs featured in the concert represented part of the cruelties of the war, as they documented the sufferings and muted stories of only those Bangladeshi refugees who were able to flee to the borders of India. This created a lacuna – a state of imagining or signaling images and events which the camera could not capture – the pain of Bangladeshis who failed to escape to the borders and experienced inhuman atrocities committed by the Pakistani army and collaborators. In her reading of Holocaust films, Libby Saxton describes such missing images as 'haunted' (2008). She also states that 'this haunting [by the missing images] has served as a catalyst for aesthetic and ethical innovation, for an ongoing search for more responsible forms of witnessing'(ibid.: 2). Similarly, the 'Concert for Bangladesh' prompted the 'haunting' task of imagining the unseen/off-screen horrors towards which it gestured through moving songs but which it was unable to depict in moving images. Saul Swimmer documented the concert and made a film with the same name 'The Concert for Bangladesh' in 1972. However, in August 1971, when the concert took place, the concert itself and its extensive media coverage stimulated an ethical response in the international community. It drew the world's attention to the unseen human rights violations in Bangladesh which it had not explicitly articulated. From then on, Bangladesh saw vigorous support from different international media who came forward increasingly to document the Liberation War.

As a result, the trauma, sufferings, resistance and the revolt of the freedom-seeking people of Bangladesh (then East Pakistan) yielded numerous documentary films by local and international filmmakers during the Liberation War. Different international broadcast companies such as the BBC, NBC, French TV, CBS, Granada Television, NHK, and the

Information and Film Department of India recorded the historic event (Hasan 2011: 112; Shahaduzzaman 2009: 16; Kabir cited in Hayat 2011: 35). A few film professionals, such as Lear Levin of the US and S. Sukhdev from India, came to Bangladesh driven by their personal endeavor to record the war on celluloid (Ahmed 1996: 5).

As the Liberation War broke out during the middle of the Cold War between the world's superpowers, it was influenced by the dynamics of world politics and thus faced two oppositional responses from the superpowers. Bangladesh received direct help from India which was supported by the Soviet Union; the US Government and China, who were in alliance, did not support Bangladesh, but rather backed Pakistan (Van Schendel 2009: 169). In spite of this, the Liberation War was well recorded and reported with sympathy by the international media. In some cases, this sympathy was excessive and very biased towards Bangladesh, which led to some over reporting (Chowdhury 2012: n.p.). Drawing on references by Shahaduzzaman and Khondokar Mahmudul Hasan, it can be seen that there were five foreign countries who filmed the Liberation War: the US, Britain, France, Japan, and India (Shahaduzzaman 2009: 16; Hasan 2011: 110). In general, the international media represented Bangladesh as the victim and the Pakistani army as the oppressor.

The sympathy in regard to capturing the pain of Bangladeshis, particularly in the Western media, could be interpreted in terms of what Susan Sontag calls the 'journalistic custom' of the West of exhibiting colonized people as 'exotic' (2003: 65). Sontag describes the Western media's tendency to capture the images of 'injured bodies' in the East during different catastrophic events as exhibiting the tragedy of others, who are 'not someone [like them] who also sees', but rather as 'someone to be seen' (ibid.: 64-65). These 'others', from the other parts of the world, are 'poor', 'backward', or 'benighted' (ibid.: 64). Eleanor M. Hight and Gary D. Sampson's have made similar observation in their book: *Colonialist Photography: Imag(in)ing Race and Place* (2002). They describe the conventions of the

'Western visualization' of the East or native people as an attempt to make them and their surroundings as 'primitive', 'strange' or 'exotic'(Hight et al. 2002: 4). This Western practice of imaging 'other' as 'exotic' is even evident in the layout of the poster of 'The Concert for Bangladesh' (Figure 3.1).
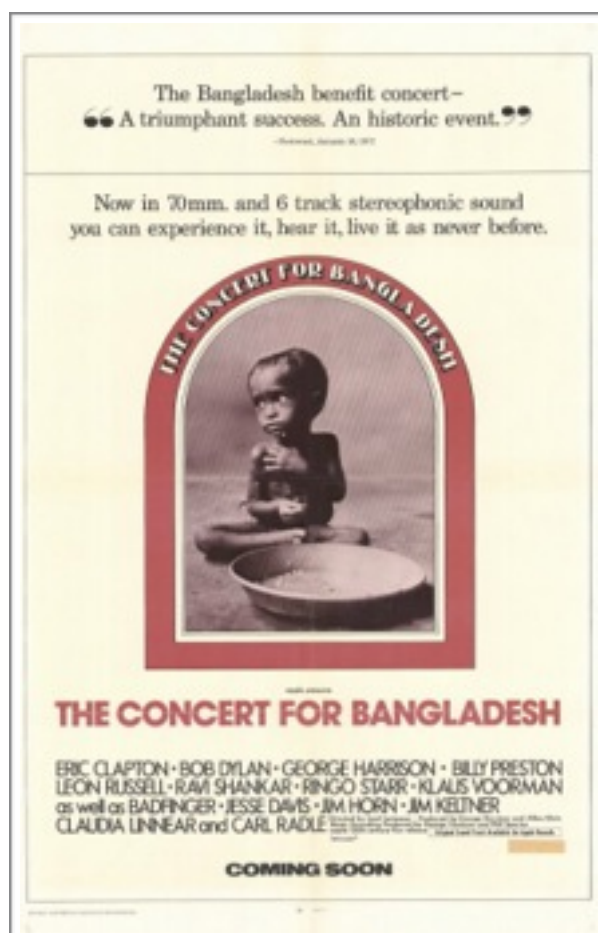
Figure 3.1 Poster for the 'Concert for Bangladesh'

As a monogram of the concert, this poster introduced Bangladesh, with its context of the war to the whole world by forming an iconic image of the land. The picture of a starving child, which is at the center of the poster, connoted Bangladeshis as an impoverished nation. In the same vein, most films or newsreels shot by the Western individuals or institutions highlighted the pain of Bangladeshis. The Bengalis' migration to India, their pathetic suffering at the hands of the Pakistani army, their deaths and rapes were highlighted with

greater importance in the Western media than their (Bengalis) vibrant resistance. After achieving independence, Bangladesh could no longer embody the exotic in the same way for the Western media, except during certain disasters. Perhaps, due to this absence of strangeness, 'Bangladesh gradually has lost its importance to Western media' which it once had (Masud 2012: 25). Perhaps due to this reason, very few wartime films produced or directed by Western filmmakers reached Bangladesh as these were targeted at the Western audiences that would respond to their fetishized and stereotyped representations of the East.

Major Khaled's War (1971), by Vaynay Kewley, is a powerful film that breaks the dominant nature of Western filming or journalism which tends to project the pain of 'others' during different catastrophic events in the East. This film was shot, edited and completed during the war. It highlighted the brave resistance of Bengalis who were capable and steadfastly determined to defend their land. Although Major Khaled, a commander of the *Mukti Fouz* (Liberation fighters), is at the center of the film, it covered the spirited participation and contribution to the war of Bengalis from different walks of life. In spite of being a foreign woman who was unfamiliar with the different locations in Bangladesh, Vaynay Kewley, the director of this film, went to the villages. She also visited the zone from where Major Khaled and his troop were organizing their operations. Kewley spent eight days in the war zone in June 1971 during which she shot her documentary. We see an interview in the film of a mother, who is still struggling to support her child despite having been raped and lost her husband to the Pakistani soldiers. Kewley mentions that the woman is still living, having failed to die by suicide as suicide is preferable for Bengali women to being dishonoured by rape. However, this film did not solely portray the mother in the image of a voiceless subaltern. We see both her victimization and struggle during the war. In the film's portrayal of other Bangladeshis, we find the same mechanism, in that they simultaneously suffer but voice their demands and promises to free the motherland. A song: *O amar jononi*

go tomar dukhkhe kandey amar pran (O my mother, my heart is weeping for your sorrows),

outlines the dominant nationalist discourse of the war and the Bengali nation, that

personifies the nation as mother.

Films by Indian directors generated other paradigms of the war, in which they told

their own narratives by highlighting Indian's contribution to the war. For example, *Nine*

Months to Freedom (1975) by S. Sukhdev, which portrays the complex issues of the socio-

political history of Bangladesh since 1947, includes the systematic oppression of

Bangladeshis by the West Pakistani rulers, but arguably emphasizes and glorifies the role of

India in providing help to vulnerable members of the Bangladeshi populace. This film,

however, endeavors, to project the war from a Bangladeshi perspective. A former District

Commissioner of Pabna, narrates the film, the cruelties of war, different events of the period

and from history, and the enormous assistance provided by India. Thus the film appears as

the voice of the Bangladeshi people, offering their own, unsolicited approval of India's

greater role in the war. However, the hidden/off-screen truth is that the film is the product of

an Indian director's thoughts and his views of the war. More or less, the same effort to

visualize India in the guise of rescuer and protector is evident in both *Refugee 71* (1972) and

Loot and Lust (n.d.). *Dateline Bangladesh* (1972), a compilation film by Gita Mehta, also

follows the same line, hailing India's efforts in helping the Bangladeshis during the war as a

great humanitarian act. In these wartime films made by Indian directors, women appear as

'victimized others' connoting the plight of the Bangladeshi nation, rescued mainly by the

Indian authority's direct and indirect assistance. The *Mukti Bahini*s' actions in the war, with

battle resources like arms and ammunitions and, to some extent, their guerrilla training, spell

out the indirect aid given by India. We do not hear the voices of women in these films. Their

tortured bodies and rotten corpses appear again and again as the visual symbols of the pain

of others.

For Bangladeshi directors, the war was a seminal event that led them, for the first time, to make nonfiction films as a record of their own national history. In doing so, they focused on images of the suffering of their own people in order to 'publicize' the war's genocidal dimension, as a crime against humanity, to the outside world (Kabir 1979: 48-49). At the same time, they glorified the training and actions of the *Muktis* in order to strengthen the patriotic sentiment and revolutionary spirit of Bengalis, in opposing Pakistani aggression. Wartime documentaries, such as *Stop Genocide* (1971), *Liberation Fighters* (1971), *Innocent Million* (1971) and *A State is Born* (1971) are considered, within Bangladesh itself, to be valuable historical records and acts of witness to the events of the Liberation War. These films depict the historical phenomenon of the Liberation War as a live event, as if they are happening in the present time. This attribute of film in creating the past as a present event leaves a spectacular effect in the minds of the viewers, particularly those who did not experience the event itself. At this point, I want to bring the term 'past-progressive-present tense', a new reality of the time created in cinema, coined by David Williams. The moving image, Williams has argued, can generate a 'past-progressive-present tense' by collapsing the vanished past and the present into this new form of time (William 2009: 108-110). Similarly, Bangladesh's wartime documentaries with their combination of sound and images both preserve the past and are able to place that past into, so to speak, the 'past-progressive-present tense'. Thus, the wartime documentaries of Bangladesh, by providing visual cues and accounts of the Liberation War in a form of vivid present, became a key agent for maintaining the collective memory of Bangladeshis and shaping their imagination of the Liberation War throughout subsequent decades.

With regard to the representation of women, the wartime documentaries by Bangladeshi directors, more or less followed the convention of maintaining collective patriarchal values and national outlook. They did not therefore contradict the patriarchal

ideology of Bangladeshi society and culture, visualizing women primarily as passive and victimized figures. The few women who took part in the frontline battle, who included a sizeable number of arms bearers, did not appear in the documentaries. Instead, they were projected either as suffering mothers, escaping with their children to a safer place having been uprooted by the war, or as ashamed rape victims, representative of the ravaging of the nation. Since the documentary genre is often regarded as a source of a direct revelation of reality, the representations of women in wartime documentaries have been viewed by Bangladeshis as transparently truthful renderings of history. These films were thus able to produce the iconic images of women in the Liberation War that were later followed by the fictionalized war films of Bangladesh. The wartime films by Bangladeshi directors are recalled as visual-historical references by its people and in their act of remembrance of the war, owing to the substantial circulation of these films in different media and also by their non-commercial screenings in schools and colleges during different periods. Consequently, the images of the wartime films have been influential in shaping the representation of women in the Liberation War discourses.

Some fifteen to twenty documentary films on the war were shot whilst it was occurring. It is, however, difficult to arrive at a precise figure, especially when documentaries made by foreign filmmakers are taken into account. Many films made by international directors are still yet to be discovered as they have never been shown before a Bangladeshi audience. For example, in 1995, after the release of *Muktir Gaan* (*Song of Freedom*), directed by Tareque Masud and Catherine Masud, present-day Bangladeshi audiences came, for the first time, to learn of the challenging voyage of a musical troupe during the war. The troupe, consisting of Bengali middle-class women and men, travelled through the conflict zones, borders, refugee settlements and guerrilla training camps by singing inspiring and rebellious songs. The original footage of their extraordinary journey

had previously been unknown to the Bangladeshi audience for twenty-four years following the end of the war. The American film director, Lear Levin, who shot the twenty hours of footage that provided the exclusive contents for *Muktir Gaan*, left the footage in his basement in Manhattan upon finding an underwhelming response from the American distributors to his film entitled *Joi Bangla* (1972). Levin, in fact, could not complete his film project and just made a tight rough-cut of the film for screening to various distributors and TV networks. The distributors' reaction was that the war was a news story and the singers' story would not create an impact like George Harrison's Concert. Thus due to the lack of interest by the international distributors in the Liberation War of Bangladesh in a post-war context, *Joi Bangla* was not completed and did not reach Bangladesh (Masud 2012: 25). Almost twenty-four years after Levin failed to complete the film, Tareque Masud and Catherine Masud made the film *Muktir Gaan* (*Song of Freedom*), mainly employing his footage. The latter was to prove extremely popular with Bangladeshi audiences upon its release in 1995. The example of *Muktir Gaan* suggests the possibility that more such undiscovered footage might well exist, including material captured by filmmakers from overseas. As *Muktir Gaan* was made almost twenty-four years after the war, it has been shaped by the more contemporary concerns of free Bangladesh; it will therefore be analyzed closely in Chapter Four, which discusses the representation of the Liberation War in independent films.

Drawing on a range of sources, including Shahaduzzaman's (2009), Hasan's (2011), and Moon's (2006) studies of the Liberation War documentaries, I have divided the films of the period into two broad groups: films made by local and foreign directors (see Appendix). Most of these films, though shot during the war, were edited and released subsequent to the war. In some cases, it has not been possible to cite the release date of these films due to the lack of proper references.

The wartime documentaries that are in circulation in Bangladesh today are acclaimed by Bangladeshis as vehicles for authentic, undistorted historical recollection. For Bangladeshis, 'faithful' representations of the war tend to involve the glorification of their resistance, revolt and suffering, together with the elimination of those aspects of the conflict which did not concern their national interest. Consequently, the 'other' documentary films – such as A.J. Kardar's *Betrayal* (1971), produced by the Pakistani regime, covering their accounts and propaganda of the war (Kabir 1979: 48) – disappeared or were forgotten with the passing of time. In Walter Benjamin's words, 'every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably' (Benjamin 2007: 255). Benjamin suggests that visual memory is selective and highly dependent on the interests of those who receive it. Thus, we find that those films which projected an *anti*-Liberationist stance were either passed over in silence or erased more or less deliberately in the act of collective remembrance of Bangladeshis.

Addressing the potential of cinematic images to create, sustain, and influence memory and identity, the remainder of this chapter will consider how wartime films by Bangladeshi directors tackled and negotiated the issues of memory, witness, war, and the themes of nation and gender via a close analysis of the documentary *Stop Genocide* (1971) by Zahir Raihan. As well as considering its aesthetic and stylistic elements, I mainly intend to examine the film's representation of gender and nationalism. I also look at the complex relationship it establishes between language, culture, ethics, and identity of Bengali nation during a crucial moment of their history. My analysis of *Stop Genocide* also considers the film in relation to discourses of torture, violence, and affliction.

Stop Genocide (1971): A dialectical cinematic message to the world

Zahir Raihan's *Stop Genocide* is widely considered the most authentic, artistic and positive treatment of the Liberation War (Shahaduzzaman 2009: 31; Qader 1993: 225; Hayat 2011: 40; Mutsuddi 1987: 58 and Hasan 2001: 114). As a documentary film, it not only records the events of the war in order to bring the trauma of Bangladeshis to global attention, thereby provoking a collective action from the world community to stop the genocide, but also unmasks the conditions and complexities of the war, in part through a dialectical visual style. By focusing on the inert response of the UN to the barbarous acts committed by the Pakistani forces in Bangladesh, the film, to some extent, criticizes the US for indirectly sponsoring the atrocities of the war through its support for Pakistan in the form of arms and ammunition provision. By foregrounding a series of radical ideas and questions, *Stop Genocide* opposes itself to the narrative articulated by those responsible for maintaining international peace, such as the UN. The film has exposed the UN pledge to support peace and human rights as little more than empty rhetoric through its juxtaposition of horrific scenes from both the Liberation War and Vietnam War. In both cases, the UN failed to protect civilian populations, contrary to the stated aims of its charter. Consequently, *Stop Genocide* may be seen as a plea for justice on the part of subjugated people worldwide and also a representative of the *testimonio* genre, in which 'the cry against oppression' is recorded (Peters quoted in Torchin 2012: 05).

Mahmudul Hossain points out that the language of *Stop Genocide* has an 'epic wideness' that transforms the film into a visual document of oppressed people beyond its immediate time and place (quoted in Hayat 2007: 146). Chinmoy Mutsuddi asserts that Raihan places the Liberation War in this film as an episode of a much broader struggle for freedom, for which people are struggling in different parts of the world (Mutsuddi 1987: 58). While agreeing with their views, I would also suggest that *Stop Genocide* is an ethical

cinematic appeal for humanity and justice, that also creates a dialectic cinematic language, opposing dominant cinema practices, and follows the aesthetics of Third Cinema. The 'revolutionary conjuncture' from which Third Cinema emerges is the nucleus of *Stop Genocide* (Wayne 2001: 8). Third Cinema is a Latin American film movement that emerged in the late 1960s, calling for a new cinema which opposes both to the First Cinema of Hollywood and Second Cinema of European models. By maintaining a low-budget production cost, this new cinema is committed to reveal social realities while it resists class oppression and imperialism. Third Cinema was coined by the Argentinian film directors Fernando Solanas and Octavio Gettino, and is considered as a counter cinema, as the spirited expression of revolutionary perspectives in a time of political upheaval (1976). Solanas and Gettino assert that:

> *Third Cinema* is, […] the cinema that *recognizes in that struggle the most gigantic cultural, scientific, and artistic manifestation of our time*, the great possibility of constructing a liberated personality with each people as the starting point—in a word, the *de-colonization of culture* (47: 1976).

This cinematic form is also similar to another Argentinian filmmaker, Fernando Birri's conception of revolutionized documentary. Birri calls for a cinema that 'disturbs, shocks and weakens reactionary ideas; a cinema that is anti-bourgeois at a national level and anti-imperialist at an international level (Birri cited in Wayne 2001: 6). Similarly, at the national level, *Stop Genocide* records the struggle for freedom of a colonized nation, whilst at the international level it participates in an anti-imperialist struggle by highlighting the US and UN's contradictory attitudes and actions. The film, ultimately, aims to bring about a new society free from all kinds of oppression.

In addition, I want to argue that by combining the conventions of both realism and a relatively stylized approach, the film is able to register a more complex historical truth than would otherwise have been possible. By echoing the dialectics of Third Cinema, *Stop Genocide* both depicts the genocide in Bangladesh and the causes and consequences of it. The film in this way enables the viewer to engage critically with 'a time of reaction and [modern] barbarism' (Wayne 2001: 8). Noting the film's revolutionary impetus in calling for a change and for a new world, Alamgir Kabir states that this documentary is an expression of 'the relentless struggle for better life being waged all around the world by working men and women', as well as providing evidence of 'genocidal crimes' committed against the Bangladeshi people (Kabir 1979: 49).

Although the film was targeted at the international community and highlights a humanitarian crisis within a larger context, *Stop Genocide* nevertheless also appeals to the national concerns and cultural context of Bangladesh. In spite of its revolutionary impulses, I would argue, in its depictions of women, *Stop Genocide* could not throw off the problematic and conventional notion of femininity in which the female body is symbolized in terms of a nationalistic discourse. As I elaborate further below, in this respect, women's sufferings are made to represent both the individual trauma of a vulnerable victim group and the collective trauma of Bengalis by symbolizing the subjugation of the 'mother nation' brought about by the Pakistani forces. The film also highlights the responsibilities and heroic acts of the *Muktijodhdha*s (freedom fighters), the brave sons of Bengal, in fighting to free the mother nation.

Made in black and white with English voice over narration, the twenty-minute *Stop Genocide* is the first documentary film on the Liberation War to be both made and projected during the time of the war itself. It was produced by the Bangladesh Chalachitra Shilpi-O-Kushali Swahayak Samity (Bangladesh Film Artist-Performers Support Union). Raihan did

not receive any support or financial assistance for the film from the Department of Film and Publication of the provisional government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh (Qader 1993: 223).[19] Instead, a number of Bangladeshi film personalities and intellectuals, who, like Raihan himself, had taken refuge in Kolkata during the war, tried to persuade the provisional government to ban *Stop Genocide*. They sent a letter to Syed Nazrul Islam, the acting President of Bangladesh in the absence of Shiekh Mujibur Rahman during the war, highlighting the fact that the film did not include a single shot of Sheikh Mujib, that it starts with a speech and image of Lenin, and ends with the playing of the international marching song of the revolutionary proletariat, which, in their view, misconstrued the nature of the conflict (Hayat 2007: 143). However, the members of the government in exile reviewed the film and certified it for exhibition, recognizing its clear historical significance. Concurrently, the film provoked a strong reaction from the Indian prime minister, Indira Gandhi, who saw the film's potential to engage audiences with the issues it addressed, in part by shocking them through its depiction of the casualties and consequences of the war. Moreover, the film persuaded her to order the Films Division of India to purchase it and circulate it worldwide (Qader 1993: 224; Leahy 2002: n.p.).

Shortly afterwards, the provisional government commissioned Raihan to produce three more documentary films on the subject of the Liberation War. This resulted in *Liberation Fighters* by Alamgir Kabir, *A State is Born* by Zahir Raihan, and *Innocent Millions* by Babul Choudhury, all of which were produced under the direct supervision of Raihan and recorded different aspects of the war. These three films, along with *Stop Genocide*, convey, at a number of different levels, Raihan's distinctive creative, critical

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[19] Although Bangladesh became independent in December 1971, the provisional government, popularly known as the Mujibnagar government, is recognized as the first but short-term official government of Bangladesh. It was formed in April 1971, during the war, by the leaders of the Awami League, through a proclamation of independence issued from Mujibnagar.

views, leading to their characterization as unique 'first-hand filmic documents' of the Liberation War (Kabir 1979: 49).

Being a revolutionary leftist activist and writer, Raihan initially expressed his political views in writing, before turning to cinema. He utilized the medium of cinema as a symbolic means of expressing the voices of the oppressed people of Bangladesh under Pakistani colonial exploitation in his film *Jibon Thekey Neya*. He was the first revolutionary filmmaker in Bangladesh to take up the camera as a rifle (to borrow a metaphor from Solanas and Gettino), and to shoot the anti-colonial struggle of an exploited people. This combination of political commitment and political aesthetic earned Raihan the epithet of the 'guerrilla filmmaker of Bangladesh' (Rebeiro 2000: n.p.).

On the night of 25 March 1971, the Pakistani army initiated a hostile military crackdown in East Pakistan known as *Operation Searchlight*. They engaged in indiscriminate mass killings, first in Dhaka and then across the other major cities in an attempt to crush Bengali nationalism and the political power of the Awami League (AL), who had overwhelmingly won the 1970s Pakistan parliamentary election, and which was thus due to form the government. AL's decisive victory in the election represented the overpowering triumph of the Bengalis at state level in Pakistan's politics. However, instead of transferring power to the elected party, West Pakistani rulers launched a systematic military attack on the night of 25 March 1971 to subdue the political authority of the AL. Raihan was deeply shocked by the contemporary political ambience. On 21 April 1971, he escaped to Kolkata through the Comilla border, and began to explore opportunities for filming the horrors of the war and the people's struggle across the border zones (Hayat 2007: 43–44). This risky, secret voyage to arrange resources to document the war in film signifies his effort to create 'guerrilla cinema'. Raihan travelled fearlessly across the borders and liberated zones to shoot the processions of displaced refugees, their plight and suffering, and

the training and battle actions of the Bengali guerrillas. Even though he was 'handicapped by the paucity of filmic documents', he went to the battlefield in order to shoot with whatever pieces of equipment he had to hand (Kabir 1979: 48).

Alamgir Kabir, one of the crew members of *Stop Genocide,* who also did its voice-over narration, describes Raihan's desperate zeal in recording the reality of the battlefield, even to the extent of disregarding threats to his own life:

> Zahir was a revolutionary and when revolutionaries go to war they know that their chance of death or life is fifty-fifty. Either to die or live. At the time of the shooting of *Stop Genocide*, we went to the Maldah border area. There was a Pakistani camp very near to the place where we were travelling and they [the Pakistani army] could have blown us up. We could have died there. Foolishly, we went through a minefield and crossed it. Whoever went before us, they died - we're alive.[20]

The conditions – the 'revolutionary conjunctures' – under which *Stop Genocide* was made, signify its status as both Third Cinema and guerrilla cinema. Although guerrilla cinema and Third Cinema are two distinct film genres, they have similarities. Mike Wayne identifies this period as the 'dark times of neo-liberalism's hegemony', when Third Cinema made many attempts to intervene in political situations (2001: 8). In the case of guerrilla cinema, Wayne mentions that 'when filmmakers are working in conditions of political danger and state authoritarianism, when their work may be seized, censored, or when they themselves might be imprisoned, the only way they can film is by using secrecy and subterfuge' (2001: 57). The features of the critical period from which guerrilla cinema and Third Cinema emerge are evident in the context and conditions of *Stop Genocide*. This is reinforced by the film's

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[20] This quotation from Kabir is taken from one of his interviews, recorded in the documentary film, *Counter Image* [*Proikuler Jatree*], on the life and work of Kabir, directed by Kawsar Chowdhury. The DVD of *Counter Image* is produced by the Prova-Sruti-Obolokon Kendra and distributed by Laser Vision.

specific content – that is, its representations of 'guerrilla warfare' and the atrocious treatment of the populace by an imperialist power. However, Raihan's commitment to the techniques of filmmaking, similar to those of Third Cinema or guerrilla cinema with their distinctive purpose of intervening in the political system, were, in fact, in evidence even before the war, in his fiction films such as *Jibon Thekey Neya* and *Let There Be Light*. He could not complete the latter project due to the outbreak of the war and he then lived for only two months after the independence of Bangladesh.

Stop Genocide begins with the voice-over narration of a quotation from V.I. Lenin, accompanied by the triumphant music of 'The Internationale'.[21]

> To accuse those who
> Support freedom of
> Self determination i.e.,
> freedom to Secede,
> of encouraging Separatism,
> is foolish and hypocritical
> as accusing those who advocate
> freedom of Divorce
> of encouraging the
> destruction of family ties (Lenin 2000: n.p.).[22]

The quotation connotes the imperialistic tendency of the developed world to confuse freedom-seeking people's demand for freedom with the activities of separatists. This

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[21] 'The Internationale' is widely sung as the anthem of socialist parties. It expresses the thriving movement for social change, justice and freedom for oppressed people. It was written by Eugène Pottier, a transport worker of Paris, in June 1871, after the demolition of the Paris Commune by the French government.

[22] This quotation is originally from Vladimir Ilyich Lenin's *The Right of Nations to Self-Determination* written in February-May 1914, published in the same year in the journal *Prosveshcheniye Nos*. Source: Lenin Internet Archive (2000), online at: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1914/self-det/index.htm>

tendency is pointed out as foolish and hypocritical. The quotation ultimately suggests that the Bangladeshis' demand for their freedom can't be seen as the deeds of secessionists or terrorists. In a fixed frame, the reading of the quotation plays out over its graphics with a profile image of Lenin to the left. Thus the film, from its very first frame, clearly conveys its central meaning: a call for the oppressed to rise up against all forms of exploitation and to demand their freedom from their oppressors.

The next sequence fades in with a long shot of a village girl and a woman, revealing them working a husking pedal. Then a mid-close shot of the innocent smile of the girl, working on the pedal, reveals the beauty and simplicity of the Bengali villagers/women. However, the monotonous sound and movement of the pedal, and its operators' fixed postures, also create a collective image of Bengalis as an exploited working class: their exploitation is constant, like the motion of the pedal. Then, after a dissolve transition, still images of village life appear on the screen, foregrounding some of the film's credits on them. By juxtaposing images of women and nature, Raihan illustrates a common Bengali theme – the notion of the 'mother nation' that is synonymous with nature. This is evident, for instance, in the work of Kazi Nazrul Islam and other Bengali poets, through their efforts to evoke a sublime mother nation whose beauty is frequently compared with that of nature or with village scenes. For example, Nazrul employs the term *Polli jononi* (village mother) in his song *Eki oporup rupey ma tomai herinu polli jononi* ('I perceived you mother, in such unique beauty, oh my village mother'). Nira Yuval-Davis has pointed out by referring to Rebecca Grant how this positioning of women as nature represents a divide between nature and civilization and excludes women from the '"civilized" public political domain' (1997: 6). She adds that this mechanism is evident in all cultures, and that despite its apparent adoration of women as nature, undervalues women socially in comparison to men (ibid.: 06).

In Bengali literature and art, the construction of woman as nature is mainly derived

from the concept that both mother and nature can create new things, thus nature becomes a mother-like figure. However, being a leftist and having adopted a more critical approach, Raihan purposely lessens the sentimentality of traditional depictions of nature as 'beautiful mother' by overlaying images of natural scenery with the monotonous sound of the husking pedal. Afterwards, with the sound effects of marching, bombing and dogs barking, a blank frame is displayed, connoting a colonial attack on the mother nation and the inability of the cinematic medium to convey the ravishing of the mother. Raihan employs this empty space – 'a vision without image' – in order to awaken the viewers' imaginative and intellectual sensitivities to the full horror of the war (Levinas quoted in Saxton 2010b: 96). The blank frame, which is held for a full twenty seconds, is intended to provoke ethical engagement on the part of the film's audience by signalling to them the inexpressible trauma of the war.

Horrifying images of anonymous dead bodies then appear in still images one after another, offering a montage of the genocide – anonymous shattered bodies in a field, a series of decomposing dead bodies floating in a river, dogs feasting on human corpses, the wounded dead body of a child, half naked and rotting dead bodies of women – slowly displaying evidence of the atrocities and brutalities against Bengalis. As Sontag contends, images of atrocities or bodies in pain both shock us and provoke shame in us in looking close-up at the reality of the war (2003: 37). The images in Raihan's film elicit both of these emotions. They jolt the critical faculty within us into seeking an ethical engagement to stop the brutalities, which is even displayed by the insertion of the graphic: 'Stop Genocide', accompanied by the sounds of explosions and gunfire. 'The Internationale' also recurs, suggesting a revolutionary spirit breaking with the shocking mood being created a while ago. Then the rest of the film's credits appear. By referring to Wayne's words on Third Cinema, we can say that the opening of the film achieves a 'synthesis between the spectator's emotional and intellectual capacities', preparing the viewer to interrogate and comprehend

the causes behind the genocide and the political struggle of Bengalis for their national liberation (2001: 42).

Next, a *Dateline News* teleprinter appears in the frame, a symbolic apparatus for recording history. It reveals the UN Declaration of Human Rights, cited in the UN's Charter, which is arguably one of the most significant historical documents in the history of mankind. The words continuously emerge from the teleprinter whilst the voiceover narration confidently explains that the UN Charter was intended to create hope amongst the international community and determined 'to reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, in the equal rights of men and women'. This teleprinter's news is then followed by two different newscasts from two different places: one is Saigon, Vietnam; the other is Bongaon, India. Still images depict the brutal attacks of US gunships and jet fighters, discharging explosives and bombs on the villages of Vietnam. Still images of wounded and dead Vietnamese testify to the mass killings in Vietnam. Then we see moving images from Bongaon: endless lines of malnourished Bengali refugees, running across the Indian borders, haunted by the fear of losing their lives, fleeing the attack by the Pakistani army. Some are carrying with them their few remaining possessions and holding the hands of their near ones, in search of a safer place. These civilians appear as the visible victims of the turmoil and torture inflicted by the West Pakistani army. Thus, by juxtaposing these three realities or the news of the *Dateline* – the UN Declaration of Human Rights, the violation of human rights in Vietnam, and the suffering of displaced Bangladeshis who are escaping across the Indian border – Raihan reveals the contradictory values and promises of the world's authorities. This evocation of the contradictory nature of history gives rise to a *Verfremdungseffekte* or V-effect (in English alienation effect or A-effect), the central device of German dramatist-director Bertolt Brecht's epic theater. The *Verfremdungs* effect does not

appeal to the audience's capacity for empathy, but rather arouses their astonishment. Brecht contends that the V-effect

> consists in turning the object of which one is to be made aware, to which one's attention is to be drawn, from something ordinary, familiar, immediately accessible, into something peculiar, striking and unexpected. What is obvious is in a certain sense made incomprehensible, but this is only in order that it may then be made all the easier to comprehend (1964: 143-144).

At this juncture, Raihan also uncovers historic conditions so strange that the spectator can identify the limitations of received history or ideology. This arouses a higher consciousness in the audience which is able to re-position itself in relation to history. In this way, the film intends to awaken a collective political action among the audience in order to confront the contradictory nature of history (driven by the world's leading authorities).

Nearly all the fragments of the film are constructed in a similar fashion, with the inclusion of dialectical effects, intended to interrupt the movement of history or time. For example, most of the sequences conclude with a freeze-frame prolonging the image for a few seconds, with the word 'Stop' imposed by the voiceover narration. Through anti-realist effects of this sort, Raihan surprises the audience by disrupting narrative continuity. These effects create a distance between the film and audience, drawing their attention to the conditions behind the injustices and human rights violations taking place before them. They are also charged with the responsibility of seeking justice to stop the suffering of others. Drawing on Luc Boltanski's views on the obligation effect created in viewers by the images that portray the suffering of others, Libby Saxton notes, 'watching suffering from a distance can act as a spur to ethical thought and action' (2010a: 65). Likewise, *Stop Genocide*, by employing a series of 'Stop's in the voice-over and freeze-frames, generates a distance

between the audience and the images of suffering people in the film, and provokes an urgent obligation among the audience to find ways to stop the genocide.

Many filmmakers have anticipated this aesthetic strategy, which is a characteristic of Third Cinema, by involving their audience in a dialectical mode of critical thinking, employed in pursuit of social change. This is also evident in *Stop Genocide,* in what critics identify as the influences Raihan takes from the films of Eastern Europe and Cuba. James Leahy, a film historian and screenwriter, claims that *Stop Genocide* would not have been possible 'without the filmmaker's exposure to the exemplary work of [Santiago] Alvarez', during his exile in Kolkata in 1971 (Leahy 2002: n.p.). However, Leahy's observation somewhat overstates the influence of Cuban films on Raihan's work. I want to emphasize that alongside the influence of Cuban or East European films, Raihan's leftist engagement from his early life and the political awareness that emerged from the colonial repression that he, as a Bengali, experienced at firsthand, made him desperate to explore a new cinematic language. The aim of this new cinematic language was to depict the anti-colonial struggle of Bengalis. Consequently, his earlier movie, *Jibon Thekey Neya*, made in 1970, before his exile in Kolkata, also contains techniques that mirror the thrust of the Bengalis' progressing political struggle in a metaphorical manner. Being a leftist activist, Raihan was involved in a range of political movements and took an active part in the Language movement (Rebeiro 2010: n.p.). He was affiliated with the Student Federation in public and the Communist Party secretly (Hasan 2011: 120). In 1965, while organizing the Pakistan Film Festival in Dhaka, Raihan declared a pledge to reject mainstream cinema; this was the moment in which he first gave public voice to his desire for a new cinematic language:

The star system is a weapon of profit-hunting for the capitalist. Greedy businessmen imported this system from America. By destroying this system, we may foil the

insidious plot of the imperialist. Let's create the right mental attitude for collective work (Raihan quoted in Hayat 2007: 30).

Clearly, Raihan's commitment to creating a working practice in the collective interest of his group, the Bengali, developed long before his exposure to Cuban film.

The collaborative/collective working aspect of the cinema format that Raihan dreamed of, mentioned in his above quotation, is also an integral part of Third Cinema. Wayne defines this attribute of Third Cinema as 'democratic working practices' (2001: 03). By denying dominant cinema practices, dependent on the star system and capital accumulation, and strategically cultivating individuality, *Stop Genocide* is able to articulate the collective experience of the Bengalis. Raihan's film gives rise to an understanding of the nation as a form of collective belonging in which it is the Bengali nation *as a whole* which suffers and fights. Nonetheless, this collective wholeness is not fully gender neutral since the nationalist discourse of *Stop Genocide* assigns different roles to men and women according to their culturally constructed positions. Men, in the film, are mainly depicted as active freedom fighters and protectors of the nation; women appear as survivors, victims, and bearers of the nation. Although Raihan captures images of women of different ages, from teenagehood to old age, he represents them collectively as a body of tortured victims who are passive, voiceless, and non-combative.

Even when women become the focus in images of dutiful mothers, running breathlessly while holding a child in their arms, their portrayals signify the notion of 'endangered motherhood', an iconic depiction of victimization of the mother. In fact, the image of the 'endangered motherhood' is a common trope of works by Bengali writers and artists created during the national crisis period. This common motif in the narratives of motherhood reflects a patriarchal notion of femininity. Zainul Abedin, a pioneer painter of

Bangladesh, who was given the honorific title *Shilpacharya* (the great teacher of art), portrayed 'endangered motherhood' with deep pathos and sympathy by highlighting the starving, gaunt mother feeding her child in his *Famine* series. He drew this series during the Bengal famine of 1943; it is still considered amongst the most powerful visuals in Bengal art history.

The motivation, composition, and contents of Abedin's sketches (Figures 3.2 and 3.3) are reflected in Raihan's framing of women (Figures 3.4 and 3.5) as devoted mothers in *Stop Genocide*. Indeed, both Abedin and Raihan have valorized motherhood to assign to women child-bearing roles, which, until their last breath, lock them into service as devoted mothers (Figures 3.2, 3.3, 3.4 and 3.5). However, this valorization of women in art works by their depiction of 'endangered motherhood' indirectly exposes the ideological functions of patriarchy. It reveals the power relations between two genders, whereby women are situated in the private sphere of reproduction, but not in the productive sphere regarded as the male domain.

Figure 3.2 Mother image in the *Famine series* (1943) sketched by Zainul Abedin. Courtesy of the Bengal Foundation.

Figure 3.3 A drawing from the *Famine series* (1943), depicting a mother figure who is breastfeeding one child and at the same time feeding another. Courtesy of the Bengal Foundation.

Figure 3.4 A mother, in *Stop Genocide* (1971), is holding one child while breastfeeding another.

Figure 3.5 *Stop Genocide* (1971): A mother covers her child and herself with an arum leaf to shield them from the rain.

Most significantly, through this motif of 'endangered motherhood', Raihan represents the nation as mother/female to stir up the perception of nationalism within a nation which does not have its own independent state, free from Pakistani colonial exploitation. As Ernest Gellner has argued, the nation is invented by nationalism where it does not exist (1983: 55-6). In *Stop Genocide*, the nationalist discourse of the 'mother nation', who is endangered, stimulates nationalist sentiment and reinforces the need to free the nation from its enemies. Historically, however, this discourse of nationalism 'typically has sprung from masculinized memory, masculinized humiliation and masculinized hope (Enloe 1990: 44), as can be seen in the way Raihan glorifies the images of the *Mukti Bahini* (Bengali guerrillas) as *mukti pagol torun shingho* (freedom-snatching young lions), who are determined to free the motherland at any cost. Although they are dressed in *lungi* and *genzi* (singlets/vests) (Figures 3.6 and 3.7), their spirit and actions in the second half of the film make them appear as the saviours of the Bengali nation.

Figure 3.6 *Muktijoddha*s (freedom fighters) during guerrilla training in *Stop Genocide* (1971).

Figure 3.7 *Muktijoddha*s returning after a guerrilla operation in *Stop Genocide* (1971).

When Raihan portrays the activities of the guerrilla training camp, the dialectical effect of 'Stop's are not employed. Instead, by playing 'The Internationale' on the soundtrack, he instills the sequence with a lofty emotional force and elicits empathy on the part of the audience by highlighting the spirit and strength of the *Mukti Bahini,* similar to the

Aristotelian hero. Here, I mention the term 'Aristotelian hero' in order to relate the tragic hero's ability to stir the emotions to the characteristics of the *Mutijodhdha*s. In *Poetics*, Aristotle asserts that tragedy, 'is an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude; […] in the form of action, not of narrative; through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation of these emotion' (1951: 23). The emotional engagement of the audience and the catharsis of such emotions are important in an Aristotelian play. Although from the beginning of *Stop Genocide*, Raihan purposefully imposes interruption to break both the narrative continuity and the audience's emotional empathy/involvement with it, in a move similar to the Brechtian technique of alienation, he does not bring the alienation technique to bear in the portrayal of *Muktijodhdah*s. They, rather, are projected as Aristotelian heroes, seen as the source of stimulating empathy and the nationalist spirit. They are adorned with the virtues of pride for their service to the motherland. As they are not paid soldiers like the Pakistani army, pride, aplomb, and self-reliance are reflected in their warrior images.

By contrast, women are typically represented as care-worn and almost entirely lacking in nationalist sentiment; their sole concern tends to be for the lives of their children. They are, in this way, turned into passive, mute victims of the war. Although the intention of Raihan is to highlight the horror of the war by framing the suffering of the women, he cannot avoid re-creating the patriarchal view of women as inferior. This inferiority is sometimes exoticized, notably in the representation of a woman who has been raped. A sixteen-year-old girl, who has been raped by six Pakistani soldiers, is depicted as silent. The voiceover narration, as a way of redeeming her unspeakable history, articulates her violent experience of being raped. The girl, we learn, was also witness to the killing of her father, uncle and two brothers by the army. Close-up shots of her muted profile face, taken from different angles without her directly looking towards the camera, make her into a spectacle and a passive

object (Figure 3.8). The visuals and voiceover narration come together to construct the culturally repressed dimension of a raped woman, one who is burdened physically and mentally with the feeling of shame. Nayanika Mookherjee has suggested that the portrayal of this raped girl is 'representative of that invisible "shamed" group' of raped women (Mookherjee 2006: 80). The girl is paradoxically threatened with silence.

In the English-language voiceover, the male voice recounts the girl's brutal personal history authoritatively as if it 'knew best' in order to make an appeal to the global spectator. According to Kaja Silverman, the convention of voiceover in classic narrative cinema acts as 'a voice which speaks from a position of superior knowledge, and which superimposes itself "on top" of the diegesis'; it is also 'an exclusively male voice' (1988: 48). In *Stop Genocide*, the authority of the male voiceover also indicates the cultural code of Bangladesh where, according to Islamic law, a man is counted as a full person and a woman as half. To this day and in many cases, in order to act as a witness in court, it requires two women to fulfil the role of a single man. From the ownership of family property to education, in most spheres, discrimination towards women is evident at home and in public institutions. Perhaps, having being informed about the social system, Raihan employs a male voiceover in order to lend credibility to the rape victim's suffering, whilst, at the same time, erasing her subjectivity by removing her voice from the narrative. Although in some cases the silence of such women is explained in the film as resulting either from a wish not to speak or from post-traumatic stress syndrome, their muteness ultimately serves to perpetuate a masculinized ideological framework of language which associates women with lack. *Stop Genocide* therefore fits in the dynamic Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak observes in representations of Third World women, regulated by a specific dynamic of power and knowledge: they are represented as oppressed 'others' or 'subalterns', and their voices are never acknowledged or listened to (1988: 271-313).

Figures 3.8 Close-up shot of a raped girl in *Stop Genocide* (1971): ashamed and silent.

Women are silenced in *Stop Genocide* despite the fact that the resistance of the Bengalis signifies a war of existence for the whole nation, regardless of class, caste, or gender. Men, on the other hand, are depicted exclusively as heroic fighters, indirectly revealing the film's limitations as a historical document and drawing attention to its selective approach to the event. The direct and indirect participation of women on the battlefield and their various contributions to the fighting of the war are absent from the film. Of course, we cannot demand exhaustive, ideally impartial coverage of the war from a film produced under such volatile and dangerous circumstances. The camera could only capture the phenomena that the filmmaker (Raihan) was able to shoot during the gruesome situation of the war. At the same time, he had to collect footage from different sources. Inevitably, *Stop Genocide* cannot, strictly speaking, be interpreted as an *inaccurate* narrative of the War for not being able to capture every last aspect of the conflict, including the different active roles played by women in the war. However, on the other hand, we do not find any reference to those missing images, revealing women's active participation in the war.

Instead, women have been documented in particular and recurring ways that identify them as symbols. The use of female bodies as symbols of the nation are focused upon to

boost nationalist sentiment among Bengali men, encouraging them to fight; women's framing as pitiful victims serve to exoticize their suffering for audiences in the outside world. By employing the mechanism of presence and absence, Raihan portrays certain images of women that depict them as a subjugated and victimized 'spectacle' while muting their voices. This technique of showcasing the suffering of his own people was a deliberate attempt to rally humanitarian sentiment, that includes both emotion and logic, among the world's spectators. However, in portraying the horrors of the war or the triumph of the nationalist struggle, Raihan nevertheless frames men and women differently.

Finally, in the concluding fragment of the film, while Raihan appeals towards all mankind to come forward and stop this genocide, he mentions that the Liberation War is a collective resistance by Bengalis and an integral part of the ongoing struggle by working men and women of the world for a better life. Here we see the political commitment with which Raihan desperately aspires to engage both men and women in the process of creating a better world free from all injustices, reflected in the aesthetic strategy and consciousness of Third Cinema. Conversely, the ways in which female images have been constructed in this narrative through their subject positions and the operation of certain codes of framing, camera angles, voiceover use, and editing do not manifest a revolutionary motivation or imagery. Women are deployed as symbols to represent the traumatized other. Overall, despite having the impulses of a Third Cinema structure that emerged in a revolutionary context such as the Liberation War, *Stop Genocide* re-constructs gender stereotypes within the nationalist struggle.

Conclusion

In the process of making sense of the experience of the Liberation War in the collective imagination of Bangladeshis, *Stop Genocide* is acclaimed as the most authentic and

influential visual text. However, the collective trust that has been invested in this documentary needs to be re-examined and contested from different perspectives. In saying this, I do not wish to deny the evidential or factual basis of the film. Drawing on John Grierson's definition of documentary as a 'creative treatment of actuality' (Hardy 1946: 11), I would like to stress the fact that, even as a historically-grounded piece of filmmaking, *Stop Genocide* nevertheless moves us imaginatively beyond the available evidence. However, in the representation of women, the film forever links our imagination to the victimized images by focusing on them again and again, making spectacle of their suffering. Men are also revealed in the film as spectacle, not always as pitiful but usually glorified as heroes who fight bravely in the war. On the other hand, the international filmmakers have tended to depict and put into circulation images of Bangladesh as a victimized nation of women and men. However, the feature that is held in common by all the documentaries on the Liberation War is the convention of portraying the war as a form of 'mass spectacle', in order to display one's narrative of pain to others (Hoskins and O'Loughlin 2010: 03). All the wartime films, both by Bangladeshi and foreign directors, have urged an ethical call to spectators to stop the genocide, whether by highlighting the pain of Bangladeshi women or treating the nation's suffering as a 'spectacle'.

CHAPTER THREE

Dominant Discourse: Liberation War in Mainstream Films

Introduction

In this chapter, I aim to explore the codes, conventions, and ideological concerns of mainstream war films of Bangladesh. Although the dynamics of mainstream war films function strategically for constructing the popular memory and the dominant national perception of the Liberation War, they have changed over the years since that war. These changes have occurred according to the transformation of cultural politics or the political culture of different periods. Over the past 44 years, since gaining independence, Bangladesh has witnessed many shifts in the political atmosphere that are directly or indirectly linked with the pro or anti-liberation ethos. Thus, the concept of national identity has been changed many times, as has the dominant discourse of the Liberation War. The mainstream films of Bangladesh, as products of the Bangladesh Film Development Corporation (BFDC), the main body of the film industry of Bangladesh, which is controlled by the Ministry of Information, also reflect the values of the ruling government and its ideological position on the war. So the ideological context, the industrial imperative, and the cultural orientation of society in different periods are important factors in shaping the dominant discourse of the Liberation War and the nation on screen.

In order to trace how shifting themes and issues relating to the Liberation War have been crafted in mainstream movies, I have chosen to analyse closely *Ora Egaro Jon* (Those Eleven Men, 1972), *Megher Onek Rong* (Many Colors of the Cloud, 1976), *Aguner Poroshmoni* (Kindling Blaze, 1994) and *Guerrilla* (2011), four significant mainstream movies from different periods. These four films, by and large, represent the key characteristics of the different eras in which they are produced. Along with the close analysis

of these films the different eras within which they are situated are discussed chronologically. This helps to comprehend the influences and negotiations between the cinematic construction and the context.

Aims and the theoretical framework

Throughout this chapter, my main objective is to trace the connection and contradiction between gender and nation as constructed by mainstream war films. I pay attention to the mechanism of mainstream cinema and to how cinema as an ideological institution, through its textual operations, narrative structures, and production practices, deals with the issues of women and nation in relation to history. I thus probe a range of relevant issues: why and how woman acts as a visual sign of nation or motherland, how the nation making process becomes a masculine enterprise, how popular cinema utilizes the images of the *Birangona*s (rape victims) for projecting national shame or trauma, and how the use of family in mainstream war films becomes the primary trope for configuring the patriarchal ideologies of gender divisions and nationalism. In order to read mainstream war films of Bangladesh, which put the dominant national ideology up on the screen, I endeavor to analyze the films through their cultural background by linking texts to contexts. In addition, I employ a number of theoretical approaches to identify the dominant discourse of mainstream war films. I am also interested in how mainstream war films construct and dichotomize the perception of masculinity and femininity following a societal view of men and women and in how society creates a consensus of the supremacy of men and the passivity of women. Among the scholars who have given me my bearings in this regard is Kaja Silverman.

Silverman in her book, *Male Subjectivity at the Margin*, suggests that society's war discourse plays a key role in shaping the idea of conventional masculinity (1992: 62). She coins a term 'dominant fiction', in which 'the normative subject lives its imaginary relation

to the symbolic order' (ibid.: 54). It also reinforces an imaginary equation between the penis and the phallus by bonding the male subject's identification with power and privilege, enabling it to ward off the threat of its own castration. So the classic male subjectivity in the discourses of war is an ideological construction through a misrecognition of the penis as the phallus. Similarly, the ideological 'reality' in society which depends on the collective trust in the authority of the male subject, is also an 'imaginary affirmation' or misrecognition. The core elements of the dominant fiction are family and phallus. By accommodating positive Oedipus Complex and the Name-of-the-Father as their main concerns, these core elements reinforce the supremacy of the male subject and its contribution to unite or lead the family. The secondary elements of dominant fiction derived from class, race, religion, ethnicity, gender, and national ideologies.

In my analysis of mainstream war films of Bangladesh, I refer to the idea of 'dominant fiction' to detect their masquerading mechanism. These films perpetuate 'the misrecognition upon which masculinity is founded', concurring with the societal consensus (ibid.: 42). They predominantly portray the sole supremacy of masculinity in saving the nation during the war and in uniting the family after winning it. Most mainstream war films, by placing the male characters in the battle ground, have supported 'the fiction of phallic masculinity' which in Silverman context 'remains intact only for the duration of the war'(ibid.: 63). Similarly we see that very few Bangladeshi films of this genre focus on the reality after the Liberation War as it demands the portrayals of different critical aspects of socio-political conditions, as well as the crises of confidence in dominant conventions of masculinity. At this point, it is worth referring to another of Silverman's terms, 'historical trauma'. This trauma constitutes a collective loss of belief in the penis-phallus equation, as well as in other aspects of the 'dominant fiction' (ibid.: 55). The period immediately following the Second World War is often depicted in Hollywood cinema as one such

example of a period of 'historical trauma', in which war heroes are usually portrayed as the bearers of either psychological or physical wounds, connoting the suffering of the wider society after the war. The notion of 'historical trauma' we find in some alternative films which I discuss in Chapter Four, particularly in the analysis of the film *Agami* (*The Time Ahead,* 1984) by Morshedul Islam. In spite of the presence of the lack in male protagonists in some independent war films, which are similar to the dynamic of 'historical trauma', the 'dominant fiction' is predominantly visible in most popular forms of war representations/ discourses in Bangladesh. They affirm the imaginary reality of ideology and the power of male subjectivity.

The portrayal of the supremacy of the male subject in war films of Bangladesh is, however, a process of construction, despite the fact that these films deal with a real historical episode of Bangladesh. Similarly, the representations of women and the nation in war films of Bangladesh are also imagined. Following the collective ideology of the national culture, these films have projected woman's maternal body to personify the nation by creating an image of suffering *Bangla Ma* (Mother Bengal). Although she is at the center of the nationalist discourse, she does not have any agency. Her brave sons fight and die for her. She has to be protected at any cost by her sons as she is the bearer of the cultural heritage and national identity. When she is raped by the enemy she becomes impure. She then denotes the reproduction of invaders within the mother's body. These films designated a compulsory death for rape victims at the end of the films by their suicide or accidental death, connoting them as polluted. As Susan Hayward says, 'Nation culture is a product of nationalist discourses and is based in the principle of representation and (of course) repression' (2000b: 98). Mainstream war film, as one of the main bodies of national culture of Bangladesh, also participates in the process of 'repression' following the wider cultural politics of Bangladesh. These representations/repressions also reflect the collective desires of

Bangladeshis, how they want to see men, women and nation on movie screens. Consequently, the gender narratives, portrayed in other genres of films (i.e., romance movies, social dramas, or even action films), sketch broadly similar scenarios, in which raped women are depicted as fallen women and the female protagonists represent the pure form of womanhood.

The mainstream films of Bangladesh

Although in Chapter One, the characteristics, origin, and history of the dominant film culture of Bangladesh are discussed in detail, here the features of the mainstream film need to be outlined briefly. This is because the focus of this chapter is associated with the conventions and aesthetics of mainstream film in projecting and shaping the theme of the Liberation War. According to Annette Kuhn, the relationship between the economic and the ideological has always been the key factor in defining dominant cinema (1982: 22). The dominant cinema practices of Bangladesh are also derived from and dependent on the economic and ideological relations and conditions of this country. These films also appeal to the desires of the popular audience.

In most cases having being affected by the predominant influence of Bollywood, Bangladeshi popular film is becoming a hybrid form of cinematic representation. It also legitimizes the appetite of local audiences by combining the local elements, which originally derive from the folk and traditional theatre form *Jatra*. The elements of *Jatra* are also similar to the ingredients of Bollywood films: fantasy, song, dance, stylized loud acting, colorful costumes, a manifest moral code shown by the triumph of good over evil, happy endings, the use of subplots and stock characters, and the glorification of ideal womanhood - all these different *Jatra*-oriented elements have helped to formulate the identifiable structure of Bangladeshi popular film.

Mainstream film is commonly interconnected to Hollywood, and in the age of globalization, the influence of Hollywood films on any national popular cinema is inevitable. In Bangladesh, the cultural mode of the mainstream film production, however, maintains a local character, having incorporated many indigenous elements. Nonetheless, the industrial mode follows the standardized commercial structure of Hollywood through its practices of studio-based film production, distribution, and exhibition. At the same time, some key characteristics of Hollywood films, such as 'fast-paced linear narratives, goal-motivated protagonists, stars, narrative closure, […] special effects and spectacular action' (Chaudhuri 2005: 7), are also evident in the mainstream films of Bangladesh. Bollywood cinema, which with its song-dance-based entertainment format, has been very influential in shaping the structure of Bangladeshi popular cinema, is also influenced by Hollywood cinema. Ravi Vasudevan rightly points out that, 'Hollywood remained a critical reference point for thinking about industrial models and narrative form' for Indian popular films or melodramas (2010 : 17).

The mainstream war films of Bangladesh, even after placing the official versions of the 'nationalist discourse' and national identities at the center, could not avoid the inspiration of Hollywood melodramas from the 1930s and 1940s, which serve the patriarchal values of the family. By maintaining the harmony and hierarchy of the family, in which men are placed above women, the mainstream war films of Bangladesh also follow a melodramatic structure. The family becomes a platform for portraying both national and domestic crises. The significance of the family, the domestic sphere, and the centrality of women is a focus of melodrama, which might be taken to represent popular film cultures across different cultural contexts, and especially in Asia, including China, Japan, and Indonesia, as well as India (Vasudevan 2010: 9). Bangladeshi war films also elaborate upon the dominant image of woman, but depicting her as the sacrificing or suffering mother. Uniting the family or

forming the nation has been projected as a masculine activity. In addition, most war films heighten the nationalist sentiment of the audience through their essential use of music and song. So, in order to analyse the war films of Bangladesh, I also need to link and refer to different critical debates and theories on melodrama.

Again, film genres in general are not static; rather, they change according to the 'specific system of expectation [of the spectator] and hypothesis' in different times (Neale 1990: 46). The melodramatic conventions of war films of Bangladesh have also changed from time to time according to audiences' reception or industry's trend. Christian Metz also asserts that changes take place in genres according to the nature of the period: 'a classic stage, to a self-parody of the classics, to a period where films contest the proposition that they are part of genre, and finally to a critique of the genre itself' (cited in Hayward 2000a: 168). Consequently, the codes and conventions of the mainstream war films of Bangladesh are bound to go through a cycle of changes despite their distinct genre. I aim to identify these changes through a textual analysis of the four mentioned films from different periods by placing the texts into their contexts. Therefore, the historical and social contexts of the film productions as well as their reception are important factors in the process of my reading of the films.

Early mainstream war films (1972–1975)

This era had more scope to be shaped by the ethos and spirit of the Liberation War than any other period of Bangladeshi history, as it was headed by the Awami League (AL)

government who directly fought and led the war.[23] This period was governed by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, initially as the president and then later as the prime minister until 15 August 1975, when he was assassinated during a military coup, carried out by a small group of junior military officers. Mujib was the founding leader of independent Bangladesh and is referred to as *Bongobondhu* (Friend of Bengal) by Bangladeshis. He introduced secular democracy and a moderate form of socialism for the economy. He adopted nationalism, socialism, democracy and secularism as the grounding principles in the constitution. Jamaat-e-Islami (JI) was banned in this period for its members' collaboration with the Pakistani army during the war. In 1972, Collaborator's Act and in 1973, the International Crimes (Tribunal) Act were passed to prosecute the war crimes committed by local collaborators (Mookherjee 2015: 35). However, Mujib's later declaration of general amnesty for war criminals brought about the release of 26,400 of the 37,400 collaborators who were arrested just after the war. During the second half of this era, the popularity of the Mujib's government started to erode. Corruption, mismanagement and inexperience of its bureaucrats and political members were seen as the main reasons for this. Again, it needs to be noted that the newly liberated country, ravaged by the war and a devastating famine in 1974, was difficult to govern, particularly as no support was received from countries such as the United States during the famine.

However, having emerged from the spirit of the Liberation War, the political ideologies of this period were based on the secular notion of Bengali nationalism that was rooted in its language and culture. In order to promote Bengali nationalism in the film

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[23] The Awami League is a political party originally founded as the 'Muslim Awami League' in 1949 by the Bengali nationalists, Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhasani and H.S Suhrawardy. The party was the first opposition party in East Pakistan. It raised voices against the colonization by the West Pakistani rulers and contributed to the emergence of many nationalist movements for the rights of the Bengalis and the sovereignty of East Pakistan. Slowly, it evolved into a secular party by dropping the epithet 'Muslim'. It won the election overwhelmingly in 1970, under the leadership of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. The Pakistan government's refusal to transfer power to the elected members of the AL prompted the Liberation War.

industry, the Mujib government did not withdraw the ban on the theatrical exhibition of Indian films that was first issued by the Ayub government during the Pakistan period in 1965 (Raju 2006: 124).[24] Moreover, the government of this period issued the order to ban Pakistani films in the theaters of Bangladesh.

The initial film ventures of independent Bangladesh were devoted to the theme and experience of the epic struggle of the Liberation War. Filmmakers quickly captured this theme which was celebrated on the movie screen, as a functional episode of the recent past, spurring on nationalist sentiment. In some cases, this nationalist sentiment was employed purposefully to boost the morale of the despairing nation, particularly the freedom fighters who were frustrated and derailed/sent off the rails by the war-torn economy and various forms of socio-political turmoil.[25]

Yet the money making formula of the film industry was not totally abandoned, even when filmmakers attempted to document or dramatize this supremely patriotic subject of a newly independent nation. The prospects for finding a new cinematic language, which was evident in Zahir Raihan's films, particularly in *Jibon Thekey Neya* (1970) and in *Stop Genocide* (1971), were hardly visible in the early war firms in the post-liberation era. During the Liberation War a scheme for the nationalization of the film industry was drafted by a group of filmmakers, led by Raihan (Kabir 1979: 50). It prompted a hope that a radical and revolutionary change would take place in the film industry after the independence. With the enforced disappearance of Raihan just after independence, this scheme did not see the light of day. A good number of directors, however, emerged in the process of exploring the theme of the war on movie screens in this period. But very few early films were able to creatively

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[24] Pakistan Period is known among Bangladeshis as a period during when Bangladesh was part of Pakistan, from 1947 to 1971, before its independence.

[25] *Abar Tora Manush Ho* (1973) by Khan Ataur Rahman is an example of such films on this theme which employed this technique of guiding wayward freedom fighters back on to the right track.

contextualize the historical reality of the Liberation War. The reasons for this were various; a lack of proper assistance and funding from the newly born state, inadequate budget, most directors' lack of first-hand experience in the actual war operations, mushrooming investments of 'black money' in the industry in the context of the lawlessness of a recently liberated state and the erotic visualization of wartime rape scenes for commercial purposes had been the common causes for these early war movies to be of such poor quality (Kabir 1979: 52-59; Qader 1993: 227-230).

However, 1972, the year immediately after independence, saw a higher degree of film production on the theme of the Liberation War than any other year in the history of Bangladesh. In that year, five feature films were produced that dealt with this topic. These films include *Ora Egaro Jon* (Those Eleven Men, 1972), *Orunodoer Ognishakkhi* (In Flames of Sunrise, 1972), *Bagha Bangali* (Bengal Tigers, 1972), *Roktakto Bangla* (Blood-Soaked Bengal, 1972), and *Joi Bangla* (Victory to Bengal, 1972). This era, as whole, which lasted for less than four years, saw the production of nine more war films. I have made a list of these war films (see Appendix), relying on the references and research carried out by Alamgir Kabir (1979), Ahmed Aminul Islam (2008), Khondokar Mahmudul Hasan (2011) and Kaberi Gayen (2013).

Most of these films revealed the theme of the Liberation War through a mixture of realism and romanticism. They attempted to create an effect of reality for depicting the physical environment of the war, and a level of romanticism by incorporating a melodramatic mode. The use of documentary footage of the Liberation War, partial location shooting, natural lighting, and artificial arrangements to create an actual likeness to the war environment in sight and sound were employed in these films to generate the effect of reality. At the same time, these films predominately followed the melodramatic conventions of Bangladeshi cinema by accommodating song, dance, action, emotional excess and *Jatra-*

oriented stylized loud acting. Satyajit Ray, the great Kolkata-based film director, who works in the Bengali language, resentfully notes the longevity and commercial appeal of the unrefined gestures of *Jatra* in the work of Bengali filmmakers (1976: 40). He further mentions:

> *Jatra,* [is] a form of rural drama whose broad gestures, loud rhetoric and simple emotional patterns have been retained in the [Bengali] films to a degree unimaginable to those not familiar with this unique form of film making (ibid.: 40).

Similar to the many films made in West Bengal mentioned by Ray, Bangladeshi war films also retain *Jatra*-oriented features. Concurrently, these films employed polarized representations of masculinity/femininity, public/private, and heroism/villainy. The actions of the *Muktijoddha*s (Bengali guerrilla fighters) against the brutal deeds of the Pakistani army and Bengali collaborators were glorified in these films as patriot vs. traitor, or justice vs. injustice. In addition, the concept of 'nation' was projected onto the terrain of the family by placing at its top Bengali men who fought and died for their country. Eventually, they became the protagonists of all war films. In contrast, female characters remained suffering figures with idealized feminine qualities. Some films, for example, *Ora Egaro Jon*, showed women's direct participation in the war, but the dominant image of woman constructed in these films has been either as suffering mother or victimized raped woman symbolizing the nation's invasion by the enemy.

Although in this era, the prime minister, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, declared the female rape victims in the Liberation War to be *Birangonas* (brave heroines), most early war films commercially exploited the representation of *Birangona*s. Kabir argues, 'most of the directors seemed to veer round the tragic incidents of brutal rape of Bengali women by the

Pakistani occupation army[,] trying to extract from them some sexuality to be cashed in at the box-office' (1979: 55). Some critics have identified this exploitation of the raped women in cinematic representations as an external influence, which was seen first in an Indian film, *Joi Bangladesh,* by I. S. Johor (Rahman 2010: n.p.; Gayen 2013: 71). They assert that in the history of Liberation War-themed films, this is the first film to introduce sexualized and erotic images of raped women for commercial purposes. It is, however, perhaps unreasonable to blame a film for inaugurating such a norm when the film did not have any opportunity to be screened in Bangladesh. Moreover, this film was banned by the Indian government within a few days of its release (Qader 1993: 231-232). I would rather propose that the industry epitomized the attitude of the society and the state. In the following paragraph, I explain more supporting my observation in this regard.

The state's declaration of the raped women as *Birangona*s is remarkable. The government also established various projects for the rehabilitation of the *Birangona*s. However, when it came to reinstating the rape victims in society, the government and some of the NGOs who were involved in the rehabilitation projects did not keep any records of those affected (Mohsin 2004: 20), thus hindering the process of prosecuting war crimes committed against these women. Concurrently, the attitude of Bangladeshi society towards those women was similar: most families hid this issue to save their honor. Thus, the voices of *Birangona*s were silenced both within the public domain and in private discourses. This discomfort was reflected in early war films. These films followed a strategy of excluding raped women by their deaths or suicides at the end of the film. However, before their final exclusion, they were employed in extended rape sequences for the purpose of sexual eroticism, and to demonise the brutal actions of the Pakistani army. Here it is worth mentioning that, in Indian rape-revenge films, which are described by Lalitha Goplan as 'avenging women films', the indispensable rape sequence also frequently positions women

as the objects of scopophilic pleasure (1997). However, such portrayals of the raped women lead to coherent revenge actions, conducted by the victims (ibid.: 45). Thus in Indian 'avenging women films' the victim-women by arising strength in them take revenge and commit violence. In contrast, in the war films of Bangladesh, the portrayals of rape sequences mainly generate 'shame' and justify the subsequent exclusion of the rape victims through their suicides or deaths at the end of the war films. In this way, the war films of Bangladesh, from the beginning, strategically contributed to the idea that the images of *Birangona*s are part of the haunting memories for the nation, which need to be forgotten or erased.

Ora Egaro Jon (1972): the founding myths of masculinity and femininity

Ora Egaro Jon (1972) is the first full length feature film of independent Bangladesh. It is also the first fiction film of Bangladesh that deals with the theme of the Liberation War (Hasan 2011: 153). The story concerns eleven freedom fighters in the context of the Liberation War. In Bengali language '*Ora Egaro Jon*' means 'They are eleven persons or individuals'. Although the word 'individual' has a gender-neutral tone, in this film, this word signifies a male identity. Like the wording of the title, *Ora Egaro Jon*, on the whole, focuses on the distinctive role and contribution of men in the history of the Liberation War. Islam observes that these eleven men are the symbolic heroes of Bangladesh and represent the eleven sectors[26] into which Bangladesh was divided during the Liberation War (Islam 2008: 154). Chashi Nazrul Islam, the director of this film, also admits this. He mentions that along with the eleven sector commanders of the Liberation War, the 11-Point charter of demands inspired him to take the number 'eleven' in naming this film *Ora Egaro Jon* (Hasan 2011:

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[26] During the Liberation War, Bangladesh was divided into eleven sectors covering different geographical areas, from where the Bangladesh forces operated their guerrilla operation against the Pakistani army.

153).[27] However, the eleven freedom fighters of this film are civilians; they are not from the armed forces like the sector commanders who led the eleven sectors. Yet, the way these eleven men have been represented, with their physical toughness and fearless determination in the guerrilla warfare to free the motherland, signifies the masculine strength and fantasies of a soldier. They are not trained soldiers, but they defeat the professional Pakistani soldiers. By depicting the dominance of the eleven men over the whole narrative, this film connotes that 'these eleven men, by their singular effort liberated Bangladesh' (Kabir 1979: 59). *Ora Egaro Jon* thus, through the construction of the superior role of masculinity in the Liberation War, reinforces the idea of the 'dominant fiction' and societal ideological 'reality' which according to Silverman is an 'imaginary affirmation', a form of recognition based on a *misrecognition* (1992: 24, 30).

In terms of representing women in the war, this film also portrays different forms of the direct and the indirect participation of women in the war. However, it gives women a secondary status in comparison to their male counterparts. As a film that was 'highly successful commercially' (Islam 2008: 154; Kabir 1979: 58), *Ora Egaro Jon* constructs the lasting norms of masculinity and femininity in the cinematic representation of Bangladesh during this period and in subsequent years. Many cinema critics criticize *Ora Egaro Jon,* as it maintains many clichéd and conventional elements of Bangladeshi commercial cinema (Islam 2008: 154; Qader 1993: 227). They also contend that it fails to depict creatively or authentically the epic struggle of Bangladesh. This film, however, pioneered the creation of a style and a narrative structure for mainstream war films of Bangladesh. It inaugurated the

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[27] From 1966 to 1969, while Sheikh Mujibur Rahman spent almost three years in jail due to the Agartala Conspiracy Case, a mass movement was started by students in opposition to the case and the Ayub regime. *Sarbadaliya Chhatra Sangram Parishad* (All Parties Student Resistance Council) was formed in 1969 and announced an 11-Point charter of demands (*Egarodofa*) for self-government in East Pakistan.

masquerading mechanism of mainstream films as it organized a specific form of knowledge of the war by suppressing many of its real aspects.

Ora Egaro Jon begins with a Tagore song that describes the love and the sacred beauty of the mother, nature, and the country, in a ritualistic manner.

O the soil of my land, to thee I bow.

In you I see my world, the eternal mother's shield.

In my body you are diffused; in my breath and soul you are dispersed.

Your soft dark visage is etched in my essence.

Oh my mother, on your lap I was born; I shall die on your breast.

On you I shall play in my grief and in my bliss.

You brought victuals to my mouth, refreshed me with cool water.

You suffer all, you bear all, you are the mother's mother.

O the soil of my land, to thee I bow.

Director Chashi Nazrul Islam here employs the above song as a *Purva-Rang* (a kind of prologue) to indicate the main idea of this film, that is, the nationalist discourse of Bangladesh.[28] By the visualization of nature and rural landscapes, this song composes a generic figure of the mother to personify the nation. At the same time, this song serves the rituals of *Purva-Rang* in which the worship of mother and motherland are very apparent. The use of this song at the beginning not only carries the idea of a prologue, but also, with melody and tune, it 'seeks to engage the emotions of the audience' as a part of the melodramatic tradition (Beaver 1994: 229). By capturing beautiful landscapes and natural visuals, this song sequence evokes the sacred beauty of the motherland in the eyes of her

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[28] In Sanskrit drama, *Purva-Rang* is a compulsory ritual and a theatrical performance based on singing and dancing. It is observed at the beginning of the drama. By this sort of performance, gods and goddesses are worshipped to obtain their favor and protection for the drama. It also gives a little introduction about the drama's main theme or main characters. In the folk theatrical form *Jatra*, the influence of *Purva-Rang* is diffused with a mixed performance of song and dance.

son. We see the sequence from the viewpoint of Khasru, the main character of this film, who later leads the eleven men and fights bravely for the freedom of the motherland. Consequently, the song also constructs a masculinized gaze, as it guides the audience to see the sequence from the perspective of the male protagonist, Khasru; he becomes the active subject of the gaze. On the other hand, nature as a symbol of the mother reveals a feminine entity, a passive spectacle, on whom the fantasies of the male character are being projected. Thus, during the very first sequence, by following and forming a melodramatic representation, *Ora Egaro Jon* establishes the national discourse of Bangladesh that symbolizes the mother as the nation and nature. Here we see a deliberate effort to construct a suffering mother figure that evokes a sense of unity and duty among her sons to fight or die for her. This works throughout the whole film as the central aesthetic; it drives the brave eleven sons of Bangladesh, who, regardless of their different religious backgrounds, fight the war together to preserve the chastity and sovereignty of the mother nation.

In the second song of this film, we see the same technique, which employs the idealized image of a suffering mother figure to intensify the nationalist emotions. Here, while one of the freedom fighters, Nantu, is dying after being seriously wounded in a guerrilla operation, he asks one fellow freedom fighter to sing the song he had written earlier. Then, the fellow freedom fighter sings the song. It elaborates upon the images of the suffering mother who weeps for her son Khudiram.[29] At the same time, she is consoled and assured in the song that for her, there remains seven crore[30] of her offspring, who will save and protect her even by giving up their lives. Here the word 'offspring' signifies the

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[29] Khudiram Bose, a Bengali revolutionary who fought for the freedom of India during the British occupation of this country. He was one of the youngest revolutionaries involved in the struggle for independence in India and was hanged at the age of 18 years on 11 August 1908.

[30] Crore is a unit of the South Asian numbering system, which is equal to ten million.

masculine identity, as the song refers to the example of Khudiram and compares Khudiram with the dying Nantu.

> Oh mother, do not cry for having another Khudiram,
> We are here – your seven crore offspring
> If we have to give up our lives,
> We will pay back the price of our birth, by our blood.

Although the dominant image of the mother in *Ora Egaro Jon* signifies a passive type of suffering mother for narrating the nation's invasion, we also see some strong qualities in some mother characters. For example, Abu's mother willingly gives her teenage son Sabu to the hands of Khasru to take him to the battlefield despite the loss of her elder son, Abu, in the war. Since the country is not free even after the death of Abu, the mother wants her younger son, Sabu, to participate in the war to free the country. Another mother risks her life cooking for the eleven freedom fighters at a hidden camp in a village. She dies in an attack by the Pakistani army, but refuses to give the soldiers any information or indication of the whereabouts of the guerrilla fighters for whose sake she is being attacked, interrogated, and killed. These inspirational features in the mothers also boost the morale of the freedom fighters to fight fearlessly and steadfastly for the freedom of the 'mother nation'.

The way *Ora Egaro Jon* glorifies the combat potency of the eleven men in the Liberation War is, in fact, an ideological construction in which we see the reflection of the dominant fiction. Silverman argues that the 'dominant fiction consists of the image and stories through which a society figures consensus' (1992: 30). The overt emphasis on the battleground and the bodily appearance of Khasru, with strong muscles and his mastery to lead the war and his fellow combatants, suggest him to be the perfect example of a freedom

fighter. This is also a construction, but it is passed off as natural and is introduced as the dominant form of masculinity in the Liberation War. Khasru, as the protagonist, is the focus of the film's depiction of the idea of conventional masculinity. Throughout the whole film, during different stages of the war, the characteristics of different national heroes are attached to Khasru's bodily appearance. As the 'body is a more or less neutral surface of language on which a social symbolism [can be] imprinted' (Connell 1995: 46), we see a deliberate process of configuring the virtues of 'true masculinity' through the body of Khasru. Here, his body has been employed as a canvas for identity construction.

In the opening sequence, Khasru wears a coat which corresponds to the Mujib coat.[31] This sequence frames an iconography of the national hero, where we see an effort to create the bodily appearance of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman through the main character. Although Mujib did not directly fight in the Liberation War, as he was arrested by the Pakistani Army on 26 March 1971, he is known as the absolute hero and leader of the Liberation War. The whole nation leaped into the Liberation War after the speech that he delivered on 07 March 1971. The appearance of Mujib, who is regarded as the 'father of the nation', is also considered by Bangladeshis, particularly in the context of 1971, as the supreme form of heroic masculinity. Mujib's masculinity is acknowledged more through his emotions (patriotic emotions) than through his toughness as a ruler. In this sequence, a strategic effort to create the symbolic appearance of Mujib in Khasru, through his costume, emotional involvement with the motherland through the musical score and movements, is apparent. It can be described as the necessary technique of the Bangladeshi mainstream war film, as a genre, that exploits cultural codes to regulate and maintain the memory of the Liberation War, for its representations of dominant historical ideas and ideological assumptions of a

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[31] During his political campaign, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman used to wear a sleeveless coat over a panjabi and the coat was buttoned to the neck; this style of coat is now referred to as a Mujib coat. Nowadays, the political leaders or the followers of Bangladesh Awami League wear the Mujib coat so as to denote their respect to Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.

particular period. Again, this technique facilitates the aesthetic and ideology of a melodrama that creates a 'recognisable and socially constructed world' (Gledhil 1987: 37) by means of the symbolic construction of Mujib in Khasru. It also reassures the audience, at the very beginning of the film, that the nation will be secured or saved by the film's protagonist Khasru through the codification of Mujib, the supreme father figure, in him.

Figure 4.1 The male protagonist's 'macho' masculinity is depicted by his hairy chest and bare muscles, during a guerrilla operation, in *Ora Egaro Jon* (1972).

During the guerrilla fighting and action sequences, Khasru sometimes appears bare from his waist up. This depicts his leadership, toughness and combatant potency through showing his muscles. In his body, the desirable and tough masculine body of a Bengali freedom fighter has been configured in order to reconfigure the idea of Bengali manhood as 'tough guy', although ethnically or culturally Bengali manhood does not correspond to the more Western convention of the macho masculine body. However, Khasru has been projected in guerrilla actions with an aggressive warrior image. For enhancing the toughness of his masculinity, we see him in the last sequence with the outfit of a soldier that forms his

appearance to be like a sector commander. The remarkable contribution and leadership of the sector commanders in the Liberation War are embedded in the cultural memory of Bangladeshis. This outfit reveals the influence of the eleven sector commanders on the filmmaker's mind in naming the film *Ora Egaro Jon*, which he also admits.

This extensive spotlighting of masculinity in *Ora Egaro Jon* excludes women's roles from the center of this war narrative, because '[m]asculinity does not exist except in contrast with "femininity"' (Connell 1995: 68). Each of them is defined in relation to the other and they offers a conceptual opposition between men and women which is embedded within the patriarchal culture of the society. Although this film acknowledges the different roles and contributions of women in the Liberation War, it finally cannot break the traditional codes of femininity. It reinforces the patriarchal discourse of warfare, foregrounding the masculine identity as synonymous with the war. In most cases this film reflects the basic binary form of victim women and violent men in the Liberation War of Bangladesh.

Among the many female characters in the film we see a female guerrilla fighter, Keya. But Keya also finally becomes the victim of the violence of the war. In a screen appearance of less than five minutes, in a film of two hours, we see that this female character holds a strong patriotic sentiment. She is a daughter of a well off father in the village who is a collaborator. She first protests against her father's efforts while he is on his way to inform the Pakistani armies about the camp of *Mukti Bahini* (Bengali guerrilla fighters) in the village.[32] Eventually, she has to shoot her father to stop him. Later, in a guerrilla operation, Keya gets caught by the Pakistani army and is killed after being raped. *Ora Egaro Jon* is, in fact, the first film to introduce the convention of death as the final destiny for the rape victims of the war. At the beginning of the film, the wife of Khasru's friend commits suicide after being raped by the Pakistani soldiers. The director, Chashi Nazrul Islam, seems to

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[32] In this film Khasru and his friends, the eleven men, solely represent the *Mukti Bahini*.

suggest that suicide or death is the frequent solution for the raped women. This allows for their final physical absence or disappearance from the narrative, connoting them as the 'other' violated by the enemy. Later, both in films and popular plays, this exit mechanism of 'raped women' continued as a norm. Dina Siddique, a leading female Bangladeshi scholar, writes about the 'exit' technique of raped women, being found in plays:

> In popular plays on the theme of independence, for instance, the violation of individual women is often portrayed as a sacrifice for the family as well as for the nation.[…] Yet this sacrifice of her body can be redeemed only by the woman's subsequent exit from the plot, […]. The choice of the rejoining family and community is rarely exercised; ideally, she encounters death through suicide or accident (1998: 209).

In reality, the attitude of Bangladeshi society towards the raped women was similar: most families hid this issue to save their honor and in some cases, left their women in the rehabilitation centers. Here it should be noted that a similar attitude towards women who were raped or abducted by the enemy persisted in the South Asian context both during and after the partition. The governments of India and Pakistan established recovery programs to rehabilitate abducted and tortured women in their native communities. In most instances, however, members of (particularly Hindu) families, refused to accept them back into their homes as those women were thought to have ' "diluted" the "purity" of the community' (Butalia 1993: 17). Women were in fact subjected to violence at the hands of men from within their communities as well as from without (Menon and Bhasin 1998: 40). This kind of violence continued after partition on the subcontinent, as we have seen with the use of rape in the Liberation War. Although in Bangladesh the raped women received the title *Birangona* immediately after the war, the records of the *Birangona*s have been destroyed through an institutional effort that was undertaken in the name of the victims'

social integration. The uneasiness of the state and the society mutes the voices of the *Birangona*s.

Considering that a film is a signifying practice of the society that produces it, *Ora Egaro Jon,* by engaging in the practice of presenting the raped women as violated or 'other', has actually articulated the deeper code of the Bangladeshi society and its political attitude. The film expresses the institutional attitude towards the *Birangona*s by offering them forms of death, again and again. At the same time, it signifies a concept of troublesome memories concerning guilt towards *Birangona*s and reinforces a 'forgetting'.

The two main female protagonists, Shila and Mita, become the victims of wartime rape by members of the Pakistani army. Shila dies at the end of the film in the arms of her lover, Khasru, connoting an end to her damaged body. Symbolically, through her death, she has bequeathed to the hero a sacred motherland and a pure life. On the other hand, Mita attempts to commit suicide twice. At first, she tries to commit suicide by taking poison after being raped. Her later suicide attempt is with the motif to leave a pure life for her lover. Even being a doctor who has treated the wounded freedom fighters in a medical camp with great aptitude and responsibility, Mita believes that her body becomes polluted by the rape. It is no longer eligible for her lover and it needs to be destroyed by committing suicide. In both cases, she is not successful as she is restrained from doing so: in the first instance by the doctor and then, later, by her lover, Parvez. As such, she is shown to rely on the consideration and decision of the men. When Parvez assures her to forget the black past in order to help build a new life and a new society, she returns to his arms. At the same time a joyful background music begins, gesturing their happy life here after. This is, in fact, an amplification of the greatness of a man (Parvez) who has been able to afford a rape victim (Mita) a sense of relief, hope for the future, that she cannot achieve without his kindness.

Figure 4.2 Suicide is introduced as one of the prime solutions for the female rape victim's fate, in *Ora Egaro Jon* (1972).

Towards the end of the film, when Sabu's mother is asking Khasru for her son's whereabouts, Khasru is, by this point, aware of the death of Sabu, holds Sabu's mother to his arm addressing her as *ma* (mother). Khasru did not find his original mother, who might have died during the war. However, he is not hesitant to look on Sabu's mother as his own, a mother who has lost her two sons in the war. This reunion of Khasru with the mother of Sabu reinforces the idea of the return of a victorious hero to his sacred mother-nation. This also signifies that Khasru's future actions will be devoted to the construction of the newly liberated country. *Ora Egaro Jon,* from its beginning to its end, uses the images of the mother to personify the nation and also connotes her as an icon of suffering. In contrast, it places the masculine activities at the center of the war narrative. Men fight and die for the 'mother nation'. After liberating her from the invading enemy, they finally return to her to begin the reformation of the nation.

Mainstream War Films during the era of military dictatorships (1975–1990)

After the assassination of Sheikh Mujibor Rahman in August 1975, Bangladesh underwent 15 years of military dictatorships. This period, in which the country was governed first by General Ziaur Rahman, from 1975 to 1981, and then by Lieutenant General Hussain Muhammad Ershad, from 1982 to 1990, was mostly a replica of the Pakistani 'Ayub-Yahya regime' (Van Schendel 2009: 195).[33] To secure and legitimize their dictatorial rules, both Zia and Ershad promoted the growth of Islamic fundamentalism. They forged a new sense of Muslim-Bengali identity for Bangladeshis in which the Islamic religious identity prevailed over the Bengali identity.

Zia's political ideology was to distance himself as far as possible from Mujib. He removed secularism, one of the core principles of Mujib's government, from the constitution and inserted 'Bismillah-ar Rahman ur Rahim' (In the name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful) in the opening of the constitution. Zia also amended Article 6 of the constitution to configure Bangladeshi citizenship as the identity of all Bangladeshis instead of a Bengali identity. He also launched a new political party, the Bangladesh National Party (BNP), to convey and carry out his political ideologies. In addition, the Collaborator's Act was repealed on 31 December 1975 (Mookherjee 2015 :37). This helped the JI party to be politically reinstated and its members to be released from prison. Some of its members also returned to Bangladesh from Pakistan where they had been residing since after the war to avoid being placed on trial. Then, after Zia was assassinated in 1981, General Ershad came to power in 1982; he mostly followed the path Zia had set out. Through the Eighth Amendment of the constitution, Ershad declared Islam the state religion in 1988.

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[33] The 'Ayub-Yahya regime' represents a period of military dictatorships from 1958 to 1971 in Pakistan, which was ruled by General Ayub Khan from 1958 to 1969 and then by General Yahya Khan. During this period, many civil rights for the Bengalis of East Pakistan were curtailed. Corruption and nepotism in government were the common phenomena of the 'Ayub-Yahya regime'.

This period (1975-1990), both in reality and in film, was guided by the state-promoted 'selective amnesia' about the Liberation War (Mazhar 2010: n.p.). Since the history of the Liberation War requires an acknowledgment of the contribution of Mujib and an affirmation of Bengali nationalism, the military-backed government of this period repressed many historical aspects of the Liberation War attached to the ethos of Bengali nationalism. They introduced new vocabularies and words to narrate the war, promoting Islamic values and views. For example, *Muktijudhdho* (war for freedom) was replaced by the term *Shadhinota Judhdho* (war of independence) to refer to the Liberation War, while in political speeches and in popular cinema, the wartime slogan, *Joi Bangla* (Victory to Bengal) was replaced by the slogan *Bangladesh Zindabad* (Long Live Bangladesh).[34] Any documentary footage of Mujib's historical speech of 7 March 1971, or any archival footage containing Mujib's contribution to the war, was completely removed from the mainstream films of this period.

During Zia's regime, the Ministry of Information undertook a project to collect documents and to write the facts about the Liberation War. The output of this project, namely, the sixteen volumes of *Bangladesher Shadhinota Judhdho Dolilpotro* (Liberation War of Bangladesh: Documents), edited by Hasan Hafizur Rahman, were published from 1982 to 1985. However, the work contains few accounts of the women raped in the war and instead tends to marginalize this issue (Saikia 2011: 55). At the same time, this series ignores the documentation on women's active participation in the war (Parvin 2011: 1). This mechanism of institutional historiography that contributed to the absence of women's real experiences in the war was also reflected in films.

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[34] *Zindabad* is a Hindi-Urdu word from Persian origin. Its literal meaning is 'long live'. During the Pakistan period, the words 'Pakistan *Zindabad*' (long live Pakistan) were frequently used in political speeches or as a slogan to show national solidarity with Pakistan. Nayanikia Mokherjee says that *Zindabad* is considered in Bangladesh as an 'Islamicized' and a 'non-Bengali' term (2015: 40).

In the cinematic representation of the war in this era, women remain mostly passive, invisible, and away from the battlefield. If they are occasionally seen entering the battlefield, they are usually occupied with more traditional gender-specific roles, such as nursing or simply as aids to the freedom fighters. Rape sequences are afforded more screen time, and, indeed, became a 'mandatory element of war films' in this period (Gayen 2013: 83). The customary cinematic solution for raped women to be excluded from the narrative towards the end of the film, by their death or suicide, connoting them as polluted bodies, continued. In accordance with the projection of the ethos of Bangladeshi nationalism, greater attention was paid to the iconic representation of woman as the 'mother nation' both in the nationalist discourses and war films. Some war-themed films, such as *Megher Onek Rong*, did not project the sole glorification of Bengali male's role in fighting fearlessly the war, however, many war films made during this era focused on men's battle action with longer screen time.

Seven fiction war films (see Appendix) were made in the dictatorship era on the theme of the Liberation War. During the regime of Ziaur Rahman, six films were produced, among which two, *Bandhon Hara* (Unchained, 1981) and *Kolmilata* (The Edible Creeper, 1981), were funded by the government. However, these two films were criticized for their distorted representations of the Liberation War (Ahmed 1996: 08; Islam 2008: 168-169, 171). In *Kolmilata*, a new feature became visible in the cinematic representation of the war, in that it highlighted the contribution of the Bangladeshi armed forces in the Liberation War. This film portrays one of its leading characters as an army person, suggesting him as the figure of Zia, at least in appearance. During the war, Zia was the commander in chief of the Bangladesh Liberation army. The bold appearance of the army character in *Kolmilata,* with his mastery on the battlefield in guiding the *Mukti Bahini,* connotes the contribution of Zia during the Liberation War.

The Ershad regime was mostly cinematically infertile, as just one film was made on the theme of the Liberation War. Ershad, as a repatriated officer from Pakistan, did not enjoy the self-esteem of a freedom fighter like Zia.[35] His non-participation in the freedom struggle was reflected in his activities, which included the promotion of strong amnesia with regards to the ethos of the Liberation War in every cultural form. Instead, people's attention was diverted to Islam, which was given the status of the state religion during his regime.

Megher Onek Rong (1976): The rainbow of Bangladeshi nationalism

Megher Onek Rong (Many Colors of the Cloud, 1976), the maiden film venture of director Harunur Rashid, is regarded as one of the most artistic films ever produced on the theme of the Liberation War (Islam 2008: 163, Gayen 2013: 82, Hasan 2011: 176). Kabir notes that this film is a kind of 'revolt against [the] conventional format of the local cinema' (1979: 67). Although this film had been acknowledged by the critics as a subversion of the clichéd and traditional elements of Bangladeshi commercial cinema, it was withdrawn from all cinemas just a day after its release (Islam 2008: 163, Quader 1993: 391). However, the specific reasons behind this withdrawal are unknown. Islam points out that the unsophisticated practices of the Bangladeshi exhibitors' network, which always prefers and promotes crude items in films for making money, were the main reasons. He also believes that this film was withdrawn partly because of the cinema theater owners' conspiracy against it (2008: 163). Thus, it is understandable that *Megher Onek Rong* has failed to earn any money at the box office. This failure is derived from its distinct features which differ from those of the established discourse of the mainstream Bangladeshi films, and such differences also led to its immediate withdrawal from the movie theaters. However, despite having

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[35] During the Liberation War, Ershad was in Pakistan. Unlike many other Bengali Army officers, he did not take part in the Liberation War. Rather, he continued his service in the Pakistan army during the war, staying in Pakistan, and returned to Bangladesh in 1973 (Van Schendal 2009: 196).

flopped at the box office, *Megher Onek Rong* won the National Film Awards in two categories: Best Film and the Best Director in 1976. Although the contemporary cinema audiences were prevented from watching the film, it later became familiar to audiences through its frequent screenings on Bangladesh Television (BTV) during the early 1980s, primarily on different national occasions. *Megher Onek Rong* thus was able to have an impact on the public memory and popular consciousness regarding the Liberation War. It promoted a new sense of national identity, the Bangladeshi national identity, concurring with the interests, views, and ideologies of the period in which it was produced.

In *Megher Onek Rong,* the Liberation War is shown through a long flashback depicting different episodes of the war and connoting them as the haunting memories of the main characters. The film focuses on the consequences of the war for one family with the central theme: the reunion of a father and a son after the war. During the Liberation War, the members of a family are separated due to an attack by the occupying forces. A group of ten to fifteen Pakistani soldiers rape the wife of the family, Ruma, and leave her unconscious in a field. Later, Ruma finds her son, Adnan, who is merely one or two years old. The husband, Dr Omar, starts serving the war wounded as a doctor in a rehabilitation camp after not being able to find out his wife and son. Here he meets a nurse, Mathin, who is a member of an indigenous community. After the war, Dr Omar marries Mathin, on the assumption that his wife and son have died during the war. A few years later, Ruma is admitted to a rehabilitation center for women in the Hill Tracts with her son Adnan. Dr Omar works in the hospital close to the rehabilitation center, and lives in a house, adjacent to the hospital and rehabilitation center, with his new wife, Mathin.

Ruma is now suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, as she is disturbed by the traumatic past. The event of her sexual assault by the Pakistani soldiers during the war haunts her and recurs in the film through flashbacks. She does not want to live, considering

herself impure due to the episode of rape during the war. When she comes to know that her husband has married again, she decides finally to leave Adnan in front of Dr Omar's house and then to commit suicide. Next, Ruma tells Adnan an old fairy tale in which a lost prince is afforded a happy life when a witch dies, and then the prince is reunited with his parents, the king and the queen. Ruma employs this mythic story to describe herself as the witch and Adnan as the prince, who needs to be returned to his own parents. Although initially, Adnan refuses to believe this story, later he becomes convinced and goes to Dr Omar's house to meet his parents following Ruma's instruction.

Adnan does not reveal his identity to his father or to Mathin, as earlier he had to promise to Ruma not to do so. Mathin and Dr Omar receive Adnan warmly, despite their surprise at the sudden appearance of an unknown boy in their life. Meanwhile, Ruma commits suicide. When Dr Omar comes to the hospital to carry out a post-mortem of Ruma's dead body, he recognizes her. He then assumes that Adnan to be his and Ruma's son whom he had lost during the war. Later, he learns that his assumption is correct when he finds a photo hidden inside a Tabeez (a special kind of arm locket) on Adnan's arm. However, following this discovery, Mathin refuses to accept Adnan into her family, thinking her husband has deceived her by hiding the fact that his son is alive. After hearing his parents' dispute, Adnan leaves the house. Finally, Mathin realizes that she loves the boy. Along with Dr Omar, she rescues Adnan from a train line. The film ends with a reunion of the family connoting their happy life through the model of the fairy tale, told by Ruma, in which the prince, king and the queen are united. They live happily ever after.

Unlike the prevalent war films of Bangladesh, *Megher Onek Rong* does not highlight the jingoistic sentiment and nor does it emphasize the combat sequences to manifest the Liberation War as a singularly masculine enterprise. As it does not link the masculine identity to the violent defense of the nation through placing men on the battlefield with arms

and ammunition, we cannot say that this film refuses the notion of 'dominant fiction' that affirms the supremacy of the male subject. Dr Omar does not fight in the war; his participation in a temporary hospital camp to give treatment to the war wounded is depicted as coincidental rather than nationalistic. By being separated from his family following the attack by the Pakistani army, he starts serving at the camp hospital. He is shown there to be distressed by the misery and displacement of his family members. His failure to protect his wife or son from the Pakistani army is exposed as a sense of crisis of masculinity in him even when he treats skillfully those injured in the war. To the end, *Megher Onek Rong*, however, attests to Dr Omar's authority as a man, as a protagonist of this film, and as the head of a family, by uniting him with his son, Adnan. This film thus highlights the quest of a son for his father's identity, revealing the ideology of the patriarchal society that considers the father's identity rather than the mother's as the primary requirement for a child's identity. It also allocates an exclusion of the mother, Ruma, connoting her a violated 'other' for being raped by the enemy.

To process the mother's representation as 'violated' and to justify her exclusion at the end, *Megher Onek Rong* includes a mythical story, which helps establish her image as a 'witch' for having been raped. It also assigns the new mother, Mathin to the metaphorical figure of a queen, interpreting her as a pure/good mother. Thus, the two mothers are seen to occupy diametrically opposed moral standpoints: Ruma is seen as violated, and Mathin as a virtuous benefactor. It thus reinforces the patriarchal notion of women as being either 'virgins' or 'whores'.[36] Although there is a shift in the role of mother for Adnan, from Ruma to Mathin, the father, Dr Omar, remains unique and unchanged as the king of the mythical story. This symbolization confirms the 'Name-of-the-Father' as fundamental to maintain the

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[36] Molly Haskell, in her book *From Reverence to Rape: The Treatment of Women in the Movies*, identifies societal and ideological values as the key dynamics that perpetuate and fix the stereotypical postures of women in mainstream films as either 'virgins' or 'whores'. This, she says, is because that is how a patriarchal society typifies its women.

patriarchal value of the family. *Megher Onek Rong*, in fact, supports the dynamics of the family, which is one of the core elements of the 'dominant fiction' and melodrama. It also outlines the gender roles in a family in line with the socio-national views and ideologies of Bangladesh.

Figure 4.3 The Pakistani soldier's facial expression, during the rape sequence of Ruma, heightens the level of violation that later haunts her memory and drives her to think of herself as polluted and as the 'witch' of a fairy tale, in *Megher Onek Rong* (1976).

Having been produced during an era of a military dictatorship, the ethos of the Liberation War and national identity promoted in this film correspond to the contemporaneous political context. As I mentioned before that during this period, the military-backed government of Ziaur Rahman (1975-81) mostly rejected different political ideologies based on Bengali nationalism. He also removed the revolutionary path introduced by Mujib (Murshid 1997: 15; Van Schendel 2009: 193). Consequently, the identity of the nation was re-shaped in this era as 'Bangladeshi', replacing the notion of 'Bengali' nationalism with the manifestation of a Muslim-Bengali identity (Van Schendel 2009: 201-203). This new identity fabricated a specific form of national identity through

the integration of different indigenous ethnic groups with the Bengalis. *Megher Onek Rong* also affirms and reinforces the idea of Bangladeshi nationalism, revealing the institutional context and conditions within which it is produced. Accordingly, the inclusion of Mathin, an indigenous woman, as the female protagonist, whose final union with Dr Omar and Adnan connotes the idea of a shared and happy family life of Bangladeshis, involving both the ethnic minority and mainstream Bengalis. Here, mainstream Bengali identity clearly signifies a 'Muslim-Bengali' identity through the male protagonist, Dr Omar.

It needs to be noted that during the regime of Zia, and his aim to abolish the activity of JSS (Jono Shonghoti Shomiti), a political party that sought the autonomy of the indigenous people to secure their basic rights, Chittagong Hill Tracts was heavily occupied by armed forces. This regime also promoted a huge Bengali migration to the Hill Tracts (Van Schendel 2009: 212). The formation of Bangladeshi nationalism was, in fact, aimed to legitimize the dominance and agency of Bengali-Muslims over the lives of different indigenous peoples. However, it was geared towards demonstrating a sense of cultural diversity or a rainbow coalition of Bangladeshi nationalism by the integration of different ethnic groups with the mainstream Bengali population. Through this integration, the state attempted to constitute a consensus of wholeness of the national identity.

Megher Onek Rong, by highlighting Mathin's active role as a nurse in the medical camp during the war, acknowledges the contribution of different ethnic groups in the formation of the nation. This also establishes the grounds for integrating different indigenous groups within the wholeness of the Bangladeshi national identity. Mathin's perception of the Liberation War, despite her identity as from an ethnic minority group, is depicted as being more radical than that of Dr Omar, who is a mainstream Bengali. This consciousness indicates her intense patriotic feeling and a sense of responsibility towards the country. In the scenes with Mathin serving in the medical camp, and particularly during a conversation

between Mathin and Dr Omar, the repression or the exclusion of different ethnic groups from the discourse of 'Bengali' nationalism is critically highlighted:

> Mathin: Dr Omar, another wounded freedom fighter has come; he has got bullet in his arm. He may need an operation.
>
> Omar: Pardon me, Ms Mathin. I cannot bear anymore. Please leave me alone.
>
> Mathin: I know that your personal loss is massive, but we cannot forget our mission.
>
> Omar: Is mission more important than life?
>
> Mathin: Life without mission is almost similar to death; that is why we have this War of Liberation.
>
> Omar: Is the Liberation War yours as well? All these are borrowed phrases!
>
> Mathin: Sorry, Doctor, I know you do not admit me as a Bengali, but I belong to this land.

Although the portrayal of Mathin, as a nurse during the war, demonstrates the participation of different ethnic groups in the war, something that had not been addressed previously in Bangladeshi war films, it is used to uplift the spirit and wholeness of Bangladeshi nationalism. This new notion of nationalism appears as the core element of maintaining national solidarity, kinship, and family. The sublime depiction of the ethos and history of the Liberation War become subdued in comparison to the concept of Bangladeshi nationalism. The Liberation War has been projected in the film as a state of haunting memories through the long flashback of the two protagonists, Dr Omar and Ruma.

We see the context of the war as being introduced through a flashback, which initially depicts Ruma's point of view and the painful memories that are affecting her, that is, her memories of being raped. Then, the flashback continues by narrating different chronological events of the Liberation War until the independence of Bangladesh. Within this long flashback, we also come to know about the events of Dr Omar and Mathin's lives

in a medical camp during the war. The flashback, however, ends with a mid close-up shot of Dr Omar, which reveals that it has also been a conveyor of his personal memories of the war. Since this long flashback is linked with two characters who are positioned in two different places, Ruma at the rehabilitation center for women and Dr Omar at his home, it does not carry entirely the essence of one character's individual memories or subjectivity. Instead, it suggests the director's own viewpoint of the past, which he structures here through two characters' viewpoints to introduce the flashback as the collective memories of Bangladeshis about the Liberation War.

In order to suggest the flashback as an objective account of the past, we see that the director, Harunur Rashid, has inserted documentary footage of the Liberation War within this flashback. However, representation in a film, even when combined with documentary footage, is always 'shaped' or 'fashioned'. Here it is worth recalling Robert A Rosentone's observation regarding filmic interpretation of history when it includes documentary footage: 'on the screen we see not the events themselves [...] but selected images of those events carefully arranged into sequences to tell a story or to make an argument' (1988: 1180). The thematization of the cinematic memory of the Liberation War in the film is also selective despite the use of documentary footage of the war. By addressing the interests and subject position of contemporary political ideology, this film contributes to the creation of a new memory of the war. During a scene in which the moment of independence is depicted within the flashback, the popular slogan *Joi Bangla* (victory to Bengal) is not heard. *Joi Bangla* is the emblem of wartime impulse and is associated with the secular tone of Bengali nationalism. During the period of Zia's rule, the *Joi Bangla* slogan was rejected for being identified as the political vocabulary of Mujib's period along with the insignia of Bengali nationalism (Murshid 1997: 17). In the same vein, a new slogan *Tomar Desh, Amar Desh: Bangladesh, Bangladesh* (Your country, my country: Bangladesh, Bangladesh) is introduced

in *Megher Onek Rong*, replacing the *Joi Bangla* or *Tumi Ke, Ami Ke: Bangali, Bangali* (Who are you? Who am I? Bengali, Bengali) slogans. The inclusion of the new slogans is part of the process of creating a new memory of the Liberation War; one which corresponds with the interests and values of the existing political institution. Similarly, the acknowledgement of Mathin's role has been seen as an effort to stimulate awareness of the indigenous communities' contributions during the Liberation War, and, in turn, to link them with the new identity of Bangladeshi nationalism and the cultural memory of the Liberation War.

In Bangladesh, the film industry is totally dominated by Bengali-speaking people. *Megher Onek Rong* is the first Bangladeshi film which casts a tribal woman and a non-professional actress for the role of the main female protagonist. This casting of a tribal actress, and the placement at the center of the narrative of the character she is performing, should be acknowledged as a revolt against the practices of the mainstream film. But the question is, does the film really constitute a change for the representation of the main female character? This is so particularly with regard to her indigenous ethnic identity, which in most cases, is matriarchal and demands a completely different feminine characteristics than the conventional Bengali womanhood. In the early stages of her life, we see Mathin is involved in production by her participation in *Jumchash* (Swidden cultivation) and then at the field hospital as a nurse. After the war, we see her within the boundary of the home as Dr Omar's wife. Although she is not constructed fully with the passivity of a Bengali housewife, she serves the family as a virtuous wife, thus encoding the convention of Bangladeshi society. Yet, Mathin has dynamic qualities. Unlike the average housewife, she does not read fashion magazines. Rather, she reads *Time* magazine, a fact that connotes her socio-political consciousness and knowledge, despite her minority ethnic origin. She rows a boat and lights cigarettes for her husband. She has a voice of her own, protests against her husband, and is bold enough to take the decision to leave him, as she believes that he has deceived her by not

telling her about his son's existence. Nonetheless, despite all these vigorous qualities, by the end of the film she has been allocated the traditional role of a wife with child-rearing responsibilities, which is the most desirable function ascribed to women within the structure of heterosexual marriage and patriarchy. Finally, by accepting Adnan as her son, she submits to the ideological function of patriarchy and capitalism that represses female desire for the sake of sustaining the institution of the family. Gledhill notes that 'family, with its ties of duty, love and conflict, [is] the site where the individual is formed' and that it is the space for melodramatic enactments (1987: 31). *Megher Onek Rong* also follows the melodramatic norm and focuses on the interest and values of the family, in which Mathin is able to remain so as to serve and maintain it. Ruma, on the other hand, having been considered violated, disappears from the family unit.

Figure 4.4 Mathin in *Megher Onek Rong* (1976), the first female protagonist from the indigenous community of Bangladesh to be depicted in Bangladeshi film.

However, by rejecting formulaic lip-synched songs, popular star casting and studio-based shooting, *Megher Onek Rong* attempts to avoid the norms of Bangladeshi popular cinema. It mostly endeavors to create a sense of reality, except in the case of some recourse

to flashbacks. In the West, particularly in European films, flashback is considered an element that interrupts the continuity and the sense of realism in a film. However, in Bangladeshi mainstream films, the flashback is part of the prevalent narrative practices, and is not regarded as a form of interruption. Rather, by being inspired by the style of the oral folk narrative performances of Bangladesh, in which the notion of time and place are fluid, the flashback in Bangladeshi films also smoothly masks the transition of time, something to which local audiences are accustomed. However, except for the flashbacks, we see an effort to create realism in *Megher Onek Rong* through location shooting and the casting of non-professional actors and actresses. Only Rowshan Ara, the actress who played the role of Ruma, is from the mainstream film industry. Yet even she was not a regular in the industry, particularly when this film was made. Her appearance in just two or three films led to her popularity in the late 1960s. Thus, her appearance in the film, to some extent, complements the newness of other performers.

Figure 4.5 Adnan is with Mathin and Dr Omar like the prince of the fairy tale, in *Megher Onek Rong* (1976)

Although lip-synched song sequences are rejected for the sake of creating a sense of realism, *Megher Onek Rong* predominantly employs non-diegetic music to underscore the mood of the narrative. The use of music in this film, to convey the emotional feeling of the sequences and the sentiment of the characters, can be regarded as a melodramatic feature, since melodrama is defined as 'a dramatic narrative in which musical accompaniment marks the emotional effects' (Elsaesser 1987: 50). In most cases, we hear a folk tune that is associated with the mountainous or hilly regions of Bangladesh, with a strong emphasis on steady rhythm and percussion. Although this tune is used to establish the atmosphere and emotional effects of the Hill Tracts, it also includes mainstream musical instruments, like the tabla, sitar, guitar, and harmonica. By blending the percussion played by both the mainstream musical instruments and the traditional ones from the Hill Tracts, this steady tune reinforces the main mood of the film. This mood signifies a cultural synchronization between the Bengalis and Paharis (indigenous people from hilly area) within the model of Bangladeshi nationalism.

The concluding sequence of the film involves a panning shot that moves towards a rainbow, thus suggesting an end to the rain with which the film starts. The rainbow, with its combination of different colors, indicates the diverse composition of different ethnic peoples who are now seen as having a singular connection to the idea of Bangladeshi nationalism, especially as the film has shown how a Bengali man and an indigenous woman have become united. However, this unification reveals the domination of the Bengali man over the narrative as well as the life of the indigenous woman. Since the quest for the father's identity, or the father-son reunion, appears as the main focus of this film, we see that Mathin's role has been as a mediator for the father-son relationship. As Henry A. Giroux notes that the dominant film practices within a set of cinematic codes 'organize specific forms of identification, and regulate particular modes of understanding, knowledge and

agency' by embodying the ideological assumptions of the period within which the films are produced (2002: 14). *Megher Onek Rong* also consciously or unconsciously forges a new identity and memory of the Liberation War through the construction of a Bangladeshi nationalism that legitimizes the power operations and prevailing ideology of its contemporary period and politics.

Mainstream war films during the 1990s: (1990–2000)

The year 1990 represents a momentous period in the history of Bangladesh, as the country witnessed a significant political change. In this year, through a series of *Gono-obbhuthan* (popular uprisings), Ershad was forced out of power, bringing to an end the fifteen-year period of military rule in Bangladesh. This overthrow of military rule created an atmosphere for an electoral system and a hope that democracy would be restored in Bangladesh. Then, in 1991, through a 'reasonably free and fair' election under a caretaker government, the BNP came into power (Lewis 2011: 90). Khaleda Zia, the widow of Zia, was the prime minister of the BNP government, while Sheikh Hasina, the elder daughter of Seikh Mujib, was the main opposition leader and headed the AL. Despite having two women in the two most powerful positions of the state, the traditional gender ideologies or gender relations mostly remained as before in both society and in war discourses.

Although it was expected that the new democratic government would promote the history and ethos of the Liberation War, their activities revealed their anti-liberation political views. Abdur Rahman Biswas, who is criticized by many Bangladeshis for his alleged role as a *razakar* in the war, became the president of the BNP government (Mookherjee 2015:

39).[37] This period also saw the selection of Golam Azam as the *amir* (chief) of JI in 1992. After independence, Golam Azam lost his citizenship rights due to his collaboration with the Pakistani army in the mass killings of Bengalis during the war. Since the end of the war, he was residing in Pakistan until 1992 and then returned to Bangladesh. The Supreme Court's decision regarding his retaining Bangladeshi citizenship in 1993 made it apparent that the government was reinstating war criminals in the political arena. Thus, during the period of the BNP government, from 1991 to 1996, the history of the Liberation War again became an issue discouraged by the state. This repression also affected the mainstream film industry, resulting in only one film being made on the theme of the Liberation War.

Even after the political change in 1996, when the AL formed a new government under the leadership of Sheikh Hasina, the ineffective attitude of the mainstream film industry to producing war-themed films did not come to an end. During the 1990s, only three mainstream films (see Appendix) were produced on the theme of the Liberation War, among which only *Aguner Poroshmoni* (Kindling Blaze, 1994) was able to create a substantial appeal for the middle-class Bangladeshi audience. This film, however, could not subvert the main feature of mainstream war-themed films that always places men's mastery at the center of the narrative. It highlights the contribution of middle-class men who, despite their feeble bodily appearance, fight the war violently. In this film, we see a distinct gendered division of spaces: women are assigned to the domestic sphere, and men occupy the outside world. *Aguner Poroshmoni*, however, eliminates the aspect of the wartime rape of women and its erotic representation. Mother images also receive much attention despite women's limited

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[37] *Razakar* is an Urdu word. The literal meaning of this word is 'volunteer'. During the Liberation War, the Pakistani army organized a paramilitary force group, the *razakar*, consisting of local Bangladeshis and Urdu-speaking Biharis, for their support in East Pakistan. *razakars* committed heinous crimes by collaborating with the Pakistani army in the raping and killings of Bengalis during the war, and did not want to see a liberated Bangladesh.

mobility within the home. They are portrayed as good mothers: who pray for their freedom fighter sons and make every attempt to save their brave sons, biological or otherwise.

The second film, *Hangor Nodi Grenade* (The Mother, 1997), was written by a female writer, Selina Hossain. It focuses on the story of a heroic mother, who, in order to save the lives of couple of freedom fighters, sacrifices her mentally disabled son, by sending him before the Pakistani army with a weapon to mislead them into thinking him a freedom fighter. The Pakistani soldiers brutally kill him with sadistic pleasure. *Hangor* received government funding and was directed by Chashi Nazrul Islam, who had made several films on this theme. This film, however, did not attract much audience attention due to its poor production values (Gayen 2013: 90). Overall in this era, in regard to the representation of women in the war, the image of a heroic mother, who nurses or saves the freedom fighters at any cost, becomes prominent in mainstream films.

In this era, the issues on wartime violence against women and other war crimes had attracted huge public attention. The formation of the *Ekatturer Ghatak Dalal Nirmul Committee* (Committee for the Uprooting of Killers and Collaborators of 1971) in 1992, headed by Jahanara Imam, who is regarded as *Shohid Jononi* (Mother of Martyred Freedom Fighters), influenced the public's consciousness about and interest in the issues of war crimes committed during the Liberation War. In 1992, this committee staged a trial, known as *Gono Adalot* (People's Court), to attain people's demand for sentencing the JI leader, Golam Azam, for the war crimes he had committed in 1971. Nonetheless, the BNP government tried to disrupt this event, as they supported Azam's return to Bangladesh and to the political sphere. Thus, the dominant heroic mother image that can be perceived in the mainstream films of this period perhaps was influenced by the image of Jahanara Imam, who lost her son in the Liberation War. It should be noted that mainstream films produced during the period of the BNP government, particularly *Aguner Poroshmoni,* did not depict those war

crimes that were perpetrated by the Bengali collaborators. In this film, all crimes and immoral acts against humanity during the war were shown to have been committed only by the Pakistani soldiers. On the other hand, Jahanara Imam was concerned, to a great extent, with the demand for the trial of local collaborators for the war crimes they had committed. The independent film makers were profoundly moved by this trend, introduced by Jahanara Imam. They dealt with the issues of the Liberation War and war crimes in a more dynamic way than did the mainstream films of this period, as I discuss in Chapter Four.

Aguner Poroshmoni **(1994), a refiguring of masculinity and mapping of gendered spaces**

After more than a decade, *Aguner Poroshmoni* (Kindling Blaze, 1994) demonstrated a return to the theme of the Liberation War on cinema screens in Bangladesh. This film was directed and scripted by Humayun Ahmed (1948-2012), who is regarded as the most popular and enduring storyteller of Bangladesh. For the generation who grew up during the 1980s and 1990s, the influence of Ahmed's writing was irresistible. He was the most celebrated screen writer in the history of Bangladesh Television (BTV). His written dramas, which were broadcast on BTV, even crossed the border of Bangladesh during the 1980s, as viewers of West Bengal eagerly tuned in (Mustafa 2012: n.p.). Indeed, Sunil Ganguli, a renowned Indian-Bengali writer, describes Ahmed as 'the most popular writer in the Bengali language for a century' (cited in Mustafa 2012). Ahmed's immense popularity as a writer helped him receive a grant for funding to make a film on the theme of the Liberation War, from a government that was criticized for its anti-liberation agenda, due to its ideological coalition and its support of JI. His receipt of state funding also indicates the restrictions that he might have faced as a director in narrating the historical reality of the Liberation War. Nonetheless, despite this being his debut film as a director, he was able to 'bring back the middle-class audience to the cinema theaters' with *Aguner Poroshmoni* (Gayen 2013: 88). This film also

received the National Film Award in eight categories in 1994, including the Best Screenplay and the Best Dialogue Writer Awards, which went to Ahmed.

Aguner Poroshmoni is based on Ahmed's novel of the same name. The title is taken from the phrase of a Tagore song, which means 'Kindling Blaze'. By using the song as the theme tune for the film, Ahmed suggests that for Bengalis, the independence of Bangladesh is as enduring as the longing for a new sunrise. The new dawn, with its kindling blaze, will bless the Bengalis with a new life. In keeping with the essence of the Tagore song, the notion of freedom has been suggested as a complete form of liberty, which goes far beyond the traditional definition of independence that is attached to the territorial boundary of a state. It thus evokes Tagore's oriental romantic mysticism, which aspires to a higher perception of liberty and universalism. Although *Aguner Poroshmoni* typically follows the dominant aesthetic and narrative structure of Bangladeshi mainstream war films, it registers a shift by intertwining romantic elements in the war reality. For example, the use of Tagore songs in this film is also a part of the process of including romanticism. Just before and after the war, some war films also employed Tagore songs. Those songs, however, were based on the nationalist discourse of Bangladesh and personified the mother image as the nation. Notably, Ahmed does not select the kind of Tagore songs that evoke nationalist sentiment. Instead, he uses the Tagore songs that give a romantic and spiritual angle in his film. Ahmed also uses a famous folk song, *Nesha Lagilo Rey* (My Intoxicated Eyes), by Hasan Raza (1854-1922), whose written songs are very popular among Bangladeshis for their mystic and spiritual tone.

Aguner Poroshmoni focuses on a story of a family in Rankin Street, a neighborhood in old Dhaka, during the war. The homeowner, Mr Motin, gives shelter within his family to a freedom fighter, Bodiul Alam Bodi, who has come to Dhaka with the mission of carrying out a few guerrilla operations. Motin does not unfold it to his family members that Bodi is a

freedom fighter. However, his wife, Surma was suspicious of Bodi's presence from the beginning. Later when she comes to know the fact, she refuses to accommodate Bodi. She fears that, being a freedom fighter, his presence in her home might lead to an attack by the Pakistani army. Only Opala, Motin's younger daughter, is friendly towards Bodi. Motin's eldest daughter, Ratri, also cannot tolerate the presence of Bodi as an unknown man in their family. Later, we see a sudden shift in Ratri's attitude towards Bodi when she learns that he is a freedom fighter. Her restricted mobility within the boundary of the home and her detachment from the outer world or from the war upsets her. Her frustrations, which are derived from her non-participation in the war, also help foster a romantic feeling in her for the freedom fighter Bodi. Eventually, in a complete reversal of her initial feelings, she feels a profound attraction to Bodi. Similarly, Surma's feelings also change, and she finally relates to Bodi with the idealized feminine qualities of a sacrificing mother. When Bodi is shot during a guerrilla operation, she nurses him and sits in prayer, asking the Almighty Allah to cure him. The film ends with Bodi's death in a new dawn, signifying the residence of the morning sun as freedom and that costs the lives of thousands of the male offspring of Bangladesh, like Bodi.

The dimension of dominant masculinity is reconfigured in *Aguner Poroshmoni*. It eliminates the hard bodily appearance of the freedom fighters, which had been a primary feature of the freedom fighters in most mainstream Bangladeshi war films. War films, as a genre, universally project 'an aesthetic of spectacle' (Jeffords 1989: 01) in the male fighter's body, for conveying the idea of super-human qualities. Indeed, men's bodies play a crucial role in constructing the spectacular dimensions of masculinity in films. According to R.W. Connell, 'True masculinity is almost always thought to proceed from men's bodies - to be inherent in a male body or to express something about a male body' (1995: 45). In *Aguner Poroshmoni*, Ahmed breaks this traditional form of 'true masculinity' by portraying the

freedom fighters as having the unimpressive physical attributes of a middle-class Bengali and so offers a different set of images. Perhaps this is why Ratri could not even identify Bodi as a freedom fighter, until she discovered his weapons.

It is possible to demonstrate another example of how *Aguner Poroshmoni* constructs these different images of the freedom fighters. During a conversation, Motin's colleague, who is a Bengali, refers to Bengalis as *biral Bengali*s (cat Bengalis). He thinks that the *biral Bengali*s will surely be defeated by the Pakistani army. The term *biral* (cat) is intended to be understood as a diminutive form of the Royal Bengal tiger. In Bangladesh, in different victorious events, for example, in winning the war or a cricket game in which Bangladesh defeats a foreign country, Bengali men are referred to as *Bagha Bengali*s (Bengal tigers). The term *Bagha* (tiger) suggests the image of the Royal Bengal tiger as representing a more imposing masculinity in Bengali manhood. In *Aguner Poroshmoni*, Motin's colleague refers to the freedom fighters as *biral Bengali* to criticize their supposed lack of strength. But Ahmed, in fact, purposely includes this term with the aim of glorifying the determination of the freedom fighters, who, despite their ordinary physical attributes, are able to defeat a fighting giant like the Pakistani army. From the beginning, for example, in its title song, this film creates a clear image of the freedom fighters, in which courage is highlighted as the core element of their greater authority, instead of their physical strength:

Ammunitions are in their hands
Commitment is in their eyes
They have the pride to arrest the sun
Who are they? Who are they? Who are they?
They step steadfastly
They sing the song of life leaning their head on the lap of death.

However, although *Aguner Poroshmoni* does not project the male body as an object of spectacle, it be cannot said that it therefore does not maintain the notion of the 'dominant fiction'. By placing men in the outer world and projecting their sole contribution as being in relation to warfare, this film also supports the proliferation or glorification of men in the history of the Liberation War, despite their unimpressive or slight physical appearance. This is also an ideological representation, reinforcing the perception of the 'dominant fiction', which confirms the authority of the male subject. In this film, the freedom fighters actually represent the middle-class Bengalis. This new appearance and appreciation of the middle-class manhood in the Liberation War is derived from Ahmed's own experience as a member of the middle-class society, whose father was killed by the Pakistani army during the war. In addition, his writing shows a prevailing tendency to romanticize the magnetism of middle-class manhood. Again, as in the history of Bangladesh, from the Language Movement of 1952 to the recent *Gono-andolon* (mass movement) of the 1990s, the role of middle-class society has always been significant; thus, Humayun Ahmed could not help but narrate the account of the middle-class men's contribution in the Liberation War.

Figure 4.6 Ratri's overemotional expression while describing to Bodi how she will celebrate the day when Bangladesh will be liberated, in *Aguner Poroshmoni* (1995).

Another vital question arises from this situation: Does Ahmed introduce the same shift in representing the middle-class women in the context of the war? Let us start our discussion in this regard with the analysis of the female protagonist, Ratri. At first glance, we are guided by sympathy towards her. She is compelled to remain within the boundary of the home due to the appalling situation of the war, despite her overwhelming emotions about the Liberation War. She dreams of going out on the road and says that when the country has been liberated, she will dance by playing the harmonica like a character from a movie. She stops a watch and says she will make it run again if independence comes. She will also free the birds from a cage after independence. Ratri cries while reading a novel, sings emotionally when moved by the beauty of the moon - even in the gruesome situation of the war - and falls in love with a stranger from the moment she learns of his involvement as a freedom fighter in the Liberation War. Her dreams and thoughts about the Liberation War are depicted as the expression of an excessively emotional and sentimental teenage Bengali woman. She asks Bodi to take her to the war and shows that she is very brave. In fact, the way she has been represented codifies a feeble notion of femininity, someone who does not even have the courage to go to the roof, as it would mean disobeying her parents. The character of Ratri, with all of her unrealistic feminine attributes, attracted the attention of the National Award Selection Committee, who awarded Bipasha Hayat the Best Female Actress Award in 1994 for her performance in Rati's role. This appreciation reveals another fact, that is, that the unrealistic feminine features of Ratri are desirable to the cultural elites of Bangladesh, who shape the perception of women and their experiences in the discourse of the Liberation War.

Slowly, the film reveals that the domain of the home is the safest place for women; whenever they cross the boundary of the home, they face danger. In a flashback sequence, we see that once, while Ratri and Opala were going to their relative's house by car, they were

stopped by the Pakistani army. Tensions arose, as they might have had to suffer sexual abuse from the soldiers. Although no harm occurred to them that time, near the end of the film, we encounter the death of Binti, the housemaid, when she leaves the house to find a doctor for the wounded Bodi. However, her death does not receive much attention in the narrative, since all the attention is devoted to highlighting the sacrifice of Bodi, as a freedom fighter. Thus, *Aguner Poroshmoni* introduces the strictly gendered division of spaces during the war by suggesting the male's authority is in the battlefield or outside world, and the female's position is within the domestic sphere of the home. The six female characters who have been the focus of this narrative are associated with the male protagonist, Bodi. His mother; sister; his love interest, Ratri; Rati's mother, Surma; Ratri's sister, Opala, or maid servant; are always placed within the boundary of the home. As Partha Chatterjee notes, the national ideology of the reform movements in Bengal during 19th Century created a spiritual-material and home-world divide by locating the women's place in the private sphere (1990: 243-244). We also see a similar division of space in *Aguner Poroshmoni*, where women inhabit the domestic domain. Mahua Sarkar argues that in the 19th Century, both liberal reformers and Hindu revivalists preferred 'the "Hindu way of life", especially as it related to the home and family (i.e., [confining] women [within the family])' (2008: 52). Sarkar additionally notes that middle-class Muslim women also faced similar experiences during the time when they were persistently represented as 'backward' and invisible, contrasting with the overwhelming visibility of Hindu women within traditional historical discourses (ibid. 12-16). However, Chatterjee contends that the new patriarchy, supported by the Bengali reformers, considered home to be the main site for expressing spiritual qualities and allocated to women the task of maintaining and protecting the spiritual qualities of the home, something to which men could not afford to pay much attention (1990: 248). In *Aguner*

Poroshmoni, both the mothers - Bodi's mother and Ratri's mother - by their devoted and dedicated prayers, also maintain the spiritual virtues of the home.

Within its melodramatic structure, the film offers an over-investment in the family or home and hides the repression of female characters by letting them think the home is the safest shelter for them, while entrapping them in the home to serve this concept. Whenever Motin leaves the home to go to the office, Surma always brings the Quran to him, to let him touch and kiss it. As she thinks that Motin is leaving the safest zone - that of the home - he needs to have the blessings of the Quran for his protection. All the female characters' activities and fantasies revolve around the home. For Binti, the housemaid, freedom means a stable situation where she could marry and have her own home. Bodi's mother's thoughts follow the same lines. When she hears about the beautiful eldest daughter (Ratri) of the family where Bodi has taken shelter, she wishes for her to become Bodi's wife, even in the terrible situation of the war in which Bodi is taking part as a freedom fighter. It is apparent that *Aguner Poroshmoni* suggests 'the home' as a distinct and spiritual space, a safe refuge for women in a time of war. Perhaps, in order to maintain the spirituality of the home, Ahmed did not dare to include any wartime rape of women in this film, though it has been a mandatory generic element for most Bangladeshi war films. The placement of women within the home is also to support the socially sanctioned role of femininity in the family, with the woman as mother, sister, wife, daughter, or housemaid.

At the same time, *Aguner Poroshmoni* could not avoid focusing on the level of involvement of the male members in a family or home. Although it did not exclude men physically from the family unit during the time of war, it revealed them, at least mentally, as occupants of the outside world. For instance, in the sequences in which Motin is at home, he is predominantly seen tuning or listening to a radio. Here, the radio signifies a means by which he can be connected with the outer world. His failure to participate in the war

motivates him to shelter to Bodi, a freedom fighter, in his home. This act heals his wound for not being able to join the war or the real outer world. In most sequences, we see the reality of the outside world during the war through the eyes a male character, either at the time of Motin's journey to the office, or Bodi's voyage towards his home or to a guerrilla operation. As Peter Brooks defines it, melodrama is a 'certain fictional system for making sense of experience' (1976: 188). *Aguner Poroshmoni* also reproduces a fictional reality that appears as a shared reality of the Liberation War, constructing a consensus that women stayed at home during the war and men went to the outside world to participate in the violent protection of the country. In the last sequence, Bodi's death occurs in the home. However, he is shown to be crossing the boundary of the home through his death and by the touch of the new dawn. Then, the concluding shots, in which thousands of birds are seen flying animatedly in the sky, suggest that Bodi has become part of the eternal outer world that is forever liberated.

Figure 4.7 In *Aguner Poroshmoni* (1995), the home has been suggested as the protected zone for women during the war, in which both women and the pet cat, whom Ratri is feeding with milk, can inhabit peacefully.

Figure 4.8 Motin is predominantly captured listening to the radio, whereby he can connect with the outer world, in *Aguner Poroshmoni* (1995).

Although *Aguner Poroshmoni* clearly establishes the supremacy of the male in the Liberation War, it also reveals a 'crisis of masculinity' by including the sexual harassment of men. In one sequence, we see how two Pakistani soldiers are undressing a few Bengali men in a public place. This sequence reveals a wartime reality whereby Bengali men, regardless of their religion, were made victims of forced nudity by the Pakistani army in order to demonstrate their religious identity through their signs of circumcision. Circumcision is a common practice among Muslim Bengali males, but that is not the case among Hindu males. The Pakistani army used it as a strategy to identify male Hindus through their sexual organs by undressing Bengali men randomly. Although the Pakistani army killed Bengalis indiscriminately, regardless of religion, ethnicity, age, or gender, the Hindus suffered more than others from their brutality during the war. The government of Pakistan, which was dominated by West Pakistanis, considered the Hindu community as an agent of India, subverting Islam in East Pakistan. However, in this sequence, the Pakistani soldiers' pleasure and enjoyment in gazing at the nude Bengalis offends Bodi while he passes through the area. A few minutes later, Bodi returns there with his co-freedom fighter and shoots the Pakistani soldiers. Thus, while most mainstream war films illustrated sexual violence against women,

this film, 23 years after the independence of Bangladesh, reveals for the first time a reality of the past: the wartime sexual victimization of men through their forced nudity. Nevertheless, this new dimension of retelling the past by depicting a 'crisis of masculinity' focuses upon Bodi's heroic masculinity and justifies his killing of the Pakistani soldiers.

Figure 4.9 The depiction of the crisis of masculinity in Bengali manhood during the war by being forced by the Pakistani soldiers to strip naked.

To construct the image of the 'enemy', Ahmed portrays solely the Pakistani army, while he remains silent on the issues of Bengali collaborators. Except for seeing a procession of the *Shanti Committee* (East Pakistan Central Peace Committee), we do not encounter any acts by Bengali collaborators in this film.[38] This indicates Ahmed's compromise as a director in that he has to keep within the existing institutional ideology of the state. Indeed, the BNP discouraged the portrayal of Bengali collaborators as the 'enemy' in order to reinstate them (mostly the members of the JI) in the political arena. Ahmed's avoidance of the issue of Bengali collaborators, however, produces a [surely the opposite could have been otherwise] lacuna and reveals the fact that the memory of the Liberation War is always shaped by the

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[38] *Shanti Committee* was formed by the Pakistani armed forces during the war, consisting of both local Bengali and Muhajir collaborators. The main purpose of this committee was to help the Pakistani army in locating and demolishing the freedom fighters. Alongside the Pakistani army, members of *Shanti Committee* also committed heinous war crimes during the war.

interest of the contemporary government. Perhaps this is why, knowing his limitations to replicate or reveal the history of the Liberation War perfectly, at the beginning of the film, Ahmed uses a voiceover narration to make it clear that this film is telling a 'story' of the Liberation War.

As Marita Sturken notes, 'memory is a narrative rather than a replica of an experience […] memory as a form of interpretation' (1997: 07). The memories generated in *Aguner Poroshmoni* are also selective, but their impact on the viewer's consciousness and understanding about the Liberation War are very significant, as the storytelling style of Humayun Ahmed had already proved to have a great appeal among the popular audience of Bangladesh through his television dramas and novels. In this film, Ahmed naturalizes the representation of women in the cinematic frame of the war by presenting these experiences as shared or possibly true experiences of the past, while they are also selective and constructed. However, *Aguner Poroshmoni* displays women in the context of the Liberation War by situating them in a strict mapping of space, which is within the boundary of the home. In contrast, it has given greater authority to middle-class masculinity during the war. However, the middle-class men are also reconfigured in the film, at least in their appearance, by not being shown with the hyper-masculine physical attributes which have been the spectacular and predominant features of the freedom fighters in mainstream war films, as we see in *Ora Egaro Jon*.

Contemporary mainstream films (2000-2011)

This period can be considered the flourishing epoch of the mainstream war films of Bangladesh. Contemporary films are distinguished by their higher production values in comparison to previous films. Through private television channels, in particular Channel i, different corporate bodies and multinational companies became involved in producing war

films. These new sources of funding encouraged film makers from the alternative film movement in Bangladesh to enter the mainstream film industry. Young talented individuals from the television industry also took the opportunity to start directing films on the theme of the Liberation War. The re-entry into the industry of long inactive directors from the older generation has also been attributed to this new supply of funding. However, despite the change in funding sources, these films were still very much attuned to the political standpoint of the different governments that ruled across this period.

From 2001 to 2006, the BNP was in power via an alliance with JI. Many believe that during this period, cultural organizations and progressive-secular individuals experienced attacks and threats from Islamic radical groups supported and protected by JI (Van Schendel 2009: 209-210). Among these attacks was the 'Ramna Bomb Blast' - the bomb explosion at an open air concert during the Bengali New Year celebrations in 2001. A series of bomb blasts in four crowded cinema theaters in Mymensingh in 2002 saw nearly seventeen people killed and over a hundred injured. Inevitably, during this period, the depiction of the history of the Liberation War was limited by a government that partly consisted of JI. As a result, no films on the theme of the Liberation War were funded by the BNP government. However, five war movies were produced during the period (2001-2006), and these were financed by Channel i. These films, particularly *Joi Jatra* (A Victorious Journey, 2004) by Tauquir Ahmed and *Shyamol Chaya* (The Tender Shade, 2004) by Humayun Ahmed, emphasized the aspect of communal harmony during the Liberation War. In these two films, we see that the war unites people from different religions: Hindu, Muslim, and Christian people are journeying together on a boat heading for the *muktanchol* (liberated zone). Their journey, their sufferings, and their sharing of their belongings with each other are the focus of these two films, with both films covering almost the same theme but in two different ways. In this

era (2001-2006), only *Khelaghor* (Doll's House, 2006) by Morshedul Islam centers on women.

Khelaghor reveals the story of a young woman, Rehana, who has been raped by the Pakistani army and is suffering from some level of PTSD, which has resulted in her talking too much about her childhood. Upon getting discharged from a hospital after the incident of rape, she is sent by her cousin to Yakub, a college lecturer in a village/mofussil area. Rehana spends a few days in a remote area at an abandoned house with Yakub, who has been depicted as having an inert manhood, as he has no heroic motivation to join the war. In the horrific situation of the war, Yakub and Rehana slowly create a dolls' house at that decaying edifice, distant from the crowds. For a while, Rehana finds a new hope to live with Yakub, concealing her traumatic past from him. Yet the film persists in a stereotypical representation of Rehana, who as a war victim, is submitted to formulaic removal from the hero's life. In the end, Rehana leaves the place with her cousin and feels ashamed after she finds that her cousin has revealed her past to Yakub. After Rehana's exit, we see a transformation in Yakub. He becomes an active hero, expressing his desire to the freedom fighters to join them in fighting for the country. This transformation of Yakub does not exist in the novel of the same name by Mahmudul Haque, from which the film was adapted. It seems that in order to justify this transformation in Yakub, the director decides to attribute it to the removal of Rehana. This removal strategy, however, also connotes her destiny to be an abandoned woman who, as a rape victim, does not deserve to lead a happy life or be united with the hero. Although, Rehana does not commit suicide similar to way in which other rape victims do in most in war films, the purpose of her exit from heroes life and the suicide of rape victims indicate identical sense, the stranded ending of rape victims.

In 2008, the AL formed a government after a landslide election victory. Many believe that their commitment to start the prosecution of war criminals was one of the vital

factors behind their victory. As a result, they set up the 'International Crimes Tribunal' in 2009 in order to investigate and prosecute the war crimes committed by local collaborators during the Liberation War. In addition, the AL government brought constitutional change in the Fifteenth Amendment Act (2011), bringing back some principles, such as democracy, socialism, secularism, and nationalism, which had been removed during the military dictatorships of Zia and Ershad. The Constitution also re-incorporated the concept of 'Bangalee' as the identity of the nation and acknowledged the war of independence as the central force of its identity formation.

During this period, very strong institutional support can be observed for promoting *Muktijudhdher chetona* (the ethos of the Liberation War) to foster the perception of national identity and national self-esteem. The theme of the Liberation War on the movie screen started to cover many critical aspects and historical conditions of the war. For example, the issues of the war crimes committed by the members of JI started to be highlighted in the cinematic portrayal, which is evident in *Guerrilla* (2011) by Nasiruddin Yousuff. This film is a seminal one, which for the first time in the history of Bangladeshi war films, focuses on the story of a female combatant. I analyze the film closely in the next section.

Another film made during this period, *Meherjaan* (2011) by Rubaiyat Hossain, also features a female-centered narrative, focusing on a Bangladeshi woman's love affair with a Pakistani Baloch soldier during the war. However, this film experienced fierce public accusations of distorting the history of the Liberation War (Ethirajan 2011: n.p.; Ferdous et al. 2011: n.p.; and Kamol 2011: n.p.). As a result, it was withdrawn from Bangladeshi cinema theatres by the distributor just one week after its release. In my introductory chapter, I have already pointed out some aspects of this film that were felt to contradict the collectively held images of rape victims and other aspects of the war. For example, media images always structure rape victims as silenced and helpless and as a symbol of 'shame',

which became one of the common features of the rape victim in the social memory of Bangladeshis. In contrast, in *Meherjaan,* the rape victim is not ashamed and rather possesses many desires (sexual) that go beyond the cultural concepts and social understanding of rape victims. In addition, issues like homosexuality being depicted as the tendency of a war child and freedom fighters' weariness with participating in the war stimulated debate around the film. Ferdousi Priyovashini, an eminent Bangladeshi sculptor and a rape victim of 1971, upon whom the main character, Meherjaan, is based, has expressed her disappointment and has called it a 'film of disgrace towards the Liberation War and the rape victims' (cited in Gayen 2013: 104). Gayen states that the representational strategy of this film is the 'commodification of the female body and female psyche' (2013: 108) in the capitalist market, despite the fact that it is a film by a female director. The director interprets her film as a cinematic resistance, a 'counter-narrative' to the conventional portrayal of war narratives (Mohaiemen 2011: n.p.). The film faced such an outcry from the elite audience, who play an influential role in writing history, because of its portrayal of the Pakistani soldier as a protagonist and because of other aspects of the war that had not been negotiated with the cultural memory of the war or with the national interest. Moreover, this is a film by a woman director, whose courage to delve into different aspects of the war can easily be attacked by the cultural commentators by virtue of her gender. However, despite its withdrawal from the Bangladeshi cinema theaters, *Meherjaan* continues to be screened in international film festivals without any further attempt by the director or the producer to screen it locally for Bangladeshi audiences.

This period saw some positive changes in cinema viewing practices. The first multiplex cinema theater was launched in Bangladesh in 2004. The projection of Liberation War-themed films in this complex helped in attracting the Dhaka-based middle and upper-middle-class audiences to see these films. With its Dolby-digital sound and technologically

high quality projection, the multiplex created a better viewing atmosphere. Yet, the ticket price of this theater is much higher than for the other existing cinema theaters in Bangladesh. The different television channels, who came forward to produce war films, helped raise the viewing figures for these films, as they telecast the premier show of these films on their channels, alongside these films' release at popular cinema theaters across the country. However, there were still fewer war films distributed and projected throughout Bangladesh in comparison to other genres of films, for example, action films. In this period, the government's one initiative, that is, the alleviation of the amusement tax for *Guerrilla's* tickets, helped the film to be a record breaking success among the war films of Bangladesh (Gayen 2013: 111).[39]

The construction of the 'new Bengali woman' in *Guerrilla* (2011)

'Your face does not look like a Bengali, are you a Muhajir?'[40] When Syeda Bilkis Banu, the protagonist of the film *Guerrilla* (2011), is interrogated by a Pakistani soldier at an army checkpoint, her features, distinct from that of the average Bengali woman, are indicated through the gaze of a soldier (Figure 4.10). This is just one of several occasions in which the conscious effort of constructing her as different to the average Bengali woman is apparent in this film. In some cases, the method of composing such differences causes contradictory features to arise within her. Often she is not described as looking like a Bengali woman, connoting an identity that is beyond the traditional. However, in other instances, her features are aligned with that of traditional Bengali women yet disrupted by her demeanor. For example, in a flashback sequence, when Bilkis and her husband Hasan are returning from

[39] In Bangladesh, the audience has to pay a certain amount of money as the 'amusement tax' when buying a cinema ticket, which goes to the government revenue.

[40] 'Muhajir' indicates a Muslim minority community that migrated from India to Pakistan during the partition. It is widely known that during the Liberation War Muhajirs collaborated with the Pakistani army in killing Bengalis, receiving favours and protection from them in return.

Joleswari to Dhaka, Hasan's dialogue gives an account of her appearance as that of the traditional village Bengali woman, but with a wildness that makes her unique, and which arouses him: 'Apparently you look like a very soft Bengali village belle, but inside you are a savage!…Come let's be savage.' Here the gaze of Hasan shapes Bilkis in the beauty of a village Bengali girl that is made different through her provocative sexuality (Figure 4.11). Meanwhile in another sequence, when Bilkis returns home late at night from the office, her mother-in-law describes her mannerism as 'manly', which fixes her in yet a different posture from the two instances mentioned above. To create the depiction of Bilkis as an independent woman and an activist in the guerrilla operation, Nasiruddin Yousuff, the director of *Guerrilla*, constantly drives her through a path where her identity forms between the clashes and negotiations of tradition and modernity, home and world, female desires and socially endorsed femininity. This film projects her own views of the world while also depicting how she is being drawn through the views of the world. Sometimes she is terrified, sometimes terrifying; she inhabits both the spaces of home and world; she is devastating during the guerrilla attack, yet also appears as a nurturer of life when taking care of her ill mother-in-law. Thus, by adding new but clashing characteristics, Yusuff creates a suitably radical Bilkis for his film *Guerrilla*, which, for the first time in the history of Bangladeshi war films, centers on the story of a female freedom fighter.

We follow different episodic events and accounts of the Liberation War through Bilkis's direct or indirect associations and experiences with those events. The film's narrative tells of how a young woman, a traditionally compassionate Bengali middle-class wife and, less traditionally, a bank professional, gets involved in the actions of a guerrilla detachment fighting against the Pakistani army; how the disappearance of her husband makes her move towards a quest for her husband in which slowly she becomes a freedom fighter. This film breaks the dominant discourse of Bangladeshi war films that always paid

attention to masculinity. Although we do not see Bilkis fighting with arms on an actual battle field, her active role as a freedom fighter is constituted by such activities as her installing explosives, passing secret messages and other supportive tools to co-fighters, and her producing the underground bulletin, the *Guerrilla*. Further, by depicting the death of Bilkis, this film signifies her as a martyr and recognizes the agency of women in the history of the Liberation War.

Figure 4.10 Bilkis is being gazed at and interrogated by a Pakistani soldier at an army check point in *Guerrilla* (2011).

Figure 4.11 Bilkis is caught by the gaze of Hasan, shaping her in the beauty of a Bengali village girl but with a wildness which arouses him, in *Guerrilla* (2011).

Given that *Guerrilla* centers on a woman as its subject, can it be called a feminist war text or women's film? Although women's film is not a pure genre, it 'suggests, without clarity, films that might be made by, addressed to, or concerned with women, or all three' (Butler 2002: 01). Since *Guerrilla* is a film made by a male director, it may not fit in the category of women's film. Again, as this is the first Bangladeshi war film to make visible the invisible (woman) as subject matter, I argue that it should be considered a film of feminist concern. Many feminist film theorists assert that it is a prerequisite that a feminist film addresses the spectator as a woman instead of merely treating women as the subject of the story. As Steven Cohan and Linda M. Shires put it, the subject of a story may not be the subject of its actions or events (1988: 71). Since *Guerrilla* is a film that makes a conscious effort to create a new role for women in the discourse of the Liberation War, its analysis demands a feminist reading comprising the aspects that I have highlighted above. At the same time, my reading of this film will also be devoted to examining the construction of a female combatant's point of view, and the conditions or motivations that lead to such a representation of woman as an agent of war.

Guerrilla begins on the night of 25 March 1971; regarded as *Kal Ratree* (Black Night) in the history of Bangladesh. For it is on this night that the Pakistani army initiated *Operation Searchlight* – killing hundreds of thousands of unarmed Bengali people. It is this massacre that accelerated the Liberation War of Bangladesh, and it is on this night that Hasan, husband of Bilkis, disappears after leaving home to perform his journalistic duty. In search of her husband, Bilkis gradually gets involved with a group of Bengali Guerrilla fighters, working in a secret press that publishes an underground bulletin. The film goes on to reveal Bilkis's serious engagement in violent guerrilla operations, while simultaneously maintaining her day-to-day duties at the office, as a banker, and at home, as the wife looking after her ill mother-in-law. In connection with her guerrilla activities we see her involvement

with Altaf Mahmud, a historical figure regarded as a great composer of nationalist songs in pre-liberated Bangladesh. Historically, it is presumed that he was killed by the Pakistani army in 1971, as he never returned after being caught and taken by them. This is left similarly ambiguous in the film. When Altaf Mahmud and other combatants are caught by the army, Bilkis has to leave Dhaka. Journeying on her own towards her village, Joleswari, by train, we see through Bilkis's eyes the suffering and victimization of Bengali people as committed by Bengali collaborators. Meanwhile, her brother-in-law, Taslim Sardar, with whom Bilkis and her mother-in-law were living after the disappearance of her husband, is killed in Dhaka by the *Razakar*s, the collaborator and the alleged members of JI. On her return to Joleswari, Bilkis comes to know that her brother Khokon, a commander of the local guerrilla fighters, has been killed by the Pakistani army. Risking her life, she enters the killing field in order to find her brother's dead body – and is captured by the occupying forces. During her interrogation at the army office, about to be raped by a Pakistani soldier, she charges a bomb that she finds on a nearby table. The film ends with the explosion, acknowledging Bilkis as a martyr with the title card:

> On 16 December finally Bangladesh was liberated. Syeda Bilkis Banu is one of those three million martyrs who gave their life for the independence of Bangladesh in 1971.

In 2011, when *Guerrilla* was released and premiered in 13 theatres simultaneously across the country (Shazu 2011: n.p.), it had an enormous impact among the audience and the critics. Even before its release, the movie created huge audience expectation. Gayen identifies three reasons for this: first, it is a film based on the Liberation War; second, it is a

film by Nasiruddin Yousuff, a prominent cultural activist and a freedom fighter; and, finally, the film is an adaptation of the novel, *Nishiddho Loban*, by the eminent Bengali writer Syed Shamsul Haq (2013: 111). Alongside the audience attention, the government's initiative to alleviate tax on the film's tickets helped make the film an unprecedented success among the war films of Bangladesh. Its warm reception and success continued with its winning the best Asian film award at the 17th Kolkata Film Festival (KFF) and in 10 categories at Bangladesh's 'National Film Awards' of 2011 – making it a record breaker in the history of Bangladeshi film. From its production to distribution, this film enjoyed the support of the government, having received a certain amount of government funding.

Now, one important aspect that needs to be addressed here is the nature of the government's interest in this film, and how the film may have accommodated it. Many can make a point that the 'pro-liberation' political ideology of the AL, who governed the country at the time of *Guerrilla*'s release, explains their motivation in promoting a film concerning the Liberation War. After forming their government in 2009, AL initiated the prosecution of war criminals, as pledged earlier in their election manifesto. This is considered to be one factor in their landslide election victory of 2008, since the popular demand regarding this issue has increased significantly in recent times and is considered to be the unfinished agenda of Bangladesh. Eventually, the brutal representation of the Bengali collaborators, particularly the members of JI, in *Guerrilla*, endorses AL's political agenda, creating a call for justice to put those war criminals on trial. As such, this film defines and defends the history in tandem with contemporary social and political desires, and so also indicates an inevitable feature of the mainstream war films of Bangladesh – that of being affected by the dominant ideology. This is arguably the reason why Nasiruddin Yousuff could not provide a brutal representation of the JI in his earlier war-themed film *Ekattorer Jishu* (Jesus of 1971, 1993). During the period in which the BNP was in government, it was not possible to

disclose the JI's wartime activity as this party was supported by the BNP government. So it is apparent that the mainstream Bangladeshi war film, resembling Althusser's *ideological* state apparatuses, has always promoted the values and ideology of the state. Thus the memory of the Liberation War, articulated throughout the cinematic representation of mainstream film over the 45 years following the war, has been selective in accordance with a series of ideological constructions.

Christine Gledhill argues 'ideology, which codifies social and cultural values in concrete representations – stereotypes – serves the aesthetic dynamic of melodrama as much as melodrama produces ideology' (1995: 76). I will argue that the image of the protagonist Bilkis in *Guerrilla* is a construction and ideological negotiation within a melodramatic aesthetic. She has emerged from both the historical context of 1971 and the desire, fantasy and perceptions about woman in present day society. To justify this narrative of a female combatant as an authentic depiction of the Liberation War, Yousuff includes historical characters, for example Altaf Mahmud, a Bengali intellectual who does not appear in the original novel. Yousuff creates Bilkis with desired and imaginative visions in a manner similar to Rabindranath Tagore's construction of 'woman'. In his poem 'Manasi', Tagore narrates that 'woman' is a creation both by God and men. She is an entity that is half human and half imagined by men (Tagore 1969). For all her subject agency, Bilkis also connotes this notion of an entity constructed with imaginative and real aspects, in this case by a male director. And so, the central question is: what purpose does this newly constituted figure of Bilkis serve in *Guerrilla*? Is she made to satisfy what Gledhill identifies as the 'public fantasy' (1995: 77)? Or does this figure perform to recognise and accommodate the historical role and experience of women in the Liberation War? So, along with the concern of how the subject agency of Bilkis is represented in this film, I will also consider what is being said through her fictional construction.

Although the inferior social status of Bangladeshi women to their male counterparts in the highly patriarchal society of Bangladesh is inevitable, their participation in education, employment and mobility has increased significantly in recent years. From the garments industry to high administrative positions, the rise of women's employment is slowly shaping the image of an independent Bangladeshi woman. Traditionally male-determined professions have opened access to women, as seen in the recruiting of females by the armed forces, for example, which was not available before 2001. In the media, an awakened consciousness to portray an intelligent image of woman is becoming apparent. But the traditional roles of women within the family as mother, sister, wife, are still central. The corporate world identifies women as one of its targeted buyer groups within the family. So as to boost the ego of this newly identified group, an overall strategy has been adopted in commercial advertisements that involves valorizing the images of woman. This valorization is not motivated by any attempt to liberate women or to stimulate a female movement in Bangladesh that will resist the patriarchal structure of the society. Rather it is an effort to construct a fetishism in female images in the name of projecting a 'new woman', combining a traditional and modern outlook.

However, the image of Bilkis, even with the new dimension of femininity that emerges from her involvement in combatant actions, cannot reject the master narrative of Bangladeshi culture: the desire for a woman who would be perfect at home with her traditional feminine attributes. Again the involvement of corporate bodies like Robi Axiata Limited in the funding of *Guerrilla* acts as another mediating factor that helps shape such an image of a 'new woman' in Bilkis, thus placing her both within and outside of the home.

A devoted wife to her husband, a caring daughter-in-law, a trusted worker at the office and at the underground newspaper, a desperate combatant, a passionate and loving sister, an attractive woman in appearance with an artistic caliber of singing: all these

qualities are fused in Bilkis. These qualities promote her image as a 'new woman', combining the traditional notion of femininity with aspects of modernity that have emerged from the present cultural context. Even with this new and progressive construction of femininity, the motivation for her involvement in the war is projected as less political than that of men. The passionate longing to trace her disappeared husband is emphasized throughout her journey as a rebel, in contrast with the heroic inspiration of liberating the country – a motif constantly projected in war films as motivating the mission of men. Although her skilfulness in guerrilla combat is as outstanding as that of any male combatant, she is repeatedly caught up in memories of her husband through flashbacks that express her desire to be with him.

Revealing Bilkis's desire, the flashbacks mostly objectify her as 'desired' through her husband's gaze and adoration. Most of the flashbacks define her in sexual relation to her husband, projecting the social, cultural and sexual image of *badhu* (wife).[41] To contextualise her longing and desire within the figure of a *badhu*, desperate to be united with her husband and adored by him, Yousuff employs the following famous song of Kazi Nazrul Islam (1899–1976) in a sequence that also serves the melodramatic nature of Bangladeshi film.

In the field of *tepantor*[42]
I, the *badhu,* find myself waiting alone
I bathe in the dust of the path
which led you away…

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[41] *Badhu* is a Bengali word, a synonym of 'wife'. Its literal meaning is someone who has to be supported and carried. Its masculine counterpart is *bor,* synonym of husband, which means greatest, the one who has the responsibility to carry a *badhu*.

[42] The field of *tepantor* is a mythical field, which connotes a space of endlessness; it is mostly used in fairy tales, folk narratives, and poems. The hero always crosses the field of *tepantor*, in most fairly tales. Then he crosses a further seven seas and thirteen rivers to save the princess from the home of *rakshasa* (demons)

The song sequence begins with a mid long shot of a darkened attic door through which the bright sky is visible. The door appears as a secondary frame, suggesting another reality within the film's reality. Bilkis crosses the door and goes to the roof as if entering into the world of her desires, leaving behind the space of home. Intercut with flashback shots of her happily roaming field and road with her husband, the song sequence also captures her from different angles, brooding restlessly both indoors and outdoors, emphasizing her longings, and her loneliness, as a waiting *badhu*. As Teresa de Lauretis argues, identity is a process of interpretation, appropriation, and retelling (1994a). Here Yousuff uses Nazrul Islam's song to articulate the *meta*-narrative of Bangladeshi culture that desires and determines the images of *badhu* in the act of waiting, associating them with the space of home, connoting a passiveness. Although Bilkis initially appears as a symbol of *badhu*, through the course of the film she ultimately transforms into what Gledhill calls a contested 'figure of woman' (1987: 37), who breaks the normative identification of *badhu*. She is the mover of this narrative – rather than waiting passively, she becomes a hero, driving the action in order to find her husband.

In the second half of the film, Bilkis's voyage to the village through a fractured journey by train, walking, and boat, finds her repeatedly caught up in the memories of her brother. Although, in order to cover the whole of Bangladesh during the Liberation War, Yousuff places Bilkis both in Dhaka city and the village, these two places seem to be assigned as symbols of her in-laws' house and father's house, rather than as places of her own. It reminds us of Virginia Woolf's famous line in *Three Guineas*: 'as a woman I have no country' (1938: 197). Begum Rokeya (1880–1932), a Muslim feminist writer of undivided Bengal and a pioneer female activist who fought to establish women's education in Bangladesh in the early 20th century, reveals similar features of Bengali women's lives. She says:

> When we are princess or queen we live in the lord's house. Again in case of a small shade, we used to take shelter under the protection of a guardian. […] We do not even have a broken house of our own (Rokeya 1973: 74).

Here, Rokeya, through her evocation of women's place at home regardless of their class status, signifies the discrimination against Bengali women in the society and in the country. As Bangladesh privileges its male citizens in every sphere, ranging from the inheritance rights of the family property to education, perhaps the nationalist sentiment regarding the act of liberating the country is also presumed to be owned by them. Following the same mechanism, Bilkis's motivation to be involved in the Liberation War is structured as a personal interest rather than as part of the broader nationalist sentiment.

However, despite the idealization of feminine qualities in Bilkis, such as that of the sacrificing wife or caring sister, her subject agency is affirmed in *Guerrilla* both by her role as narrative agent and her female gaze. Gayen observes that Bilkis has been objectified through the male gaze many times in this film, despite her narrative centering and subjectivity (2013: 115). But I would say in most cases, even with the emergence of the male gaze, Bilkis's gaze has been affirmed and placed in a position that flattens those male gazes and in some cases addresses the female spectators. For example, in the sequence in which Bilkis is sent on a mission to place a bomb at a dinner party held by the Pakistani army, the way she is dressed arouses desire among the soldiers. With her colorful clothing, fancy accessories, and high-toned make-up, Bilkis appears to flaunt her femininity, offering herself as a passive object of the active male gaze. However, this objectification of her femininity is a purposeful creation on Bilkis's part, rendered in order to conceal her real identity as an active agent of the guerrilla operation. This is similar to Joan Riviere's idea of 'masquerade',

a strategy of adopting an excessive pose of femininity, a mask of excessive 'womanliness',

that conceals the threatening 'masculinity' of her position as an active agent; a masculinity

that may provoke reprisals if revealed (Riviere 1986: 38). Mary Ann Doane states that this

wearing of a mask of femininity can induce a distance between the female spectator and the

screen image of woman. According to Doane this distance is a key factor for addressing and

engaging the female spectator. She also argues that the removal of sympathy, empathy, or

over identification with the female body can create this type of distance (1987: 177-181). In

this sequence, Bilkis's excessive pose of femininity also creates a distance for the spectator.

Here the spectator is not trapped within the reality effect of the film as well as with the 'male

gaze', as he or she knows that it is a performance by Bilkis.[43]

In this sequence, when Bilkis is returning to the party after placing the bomb in the

bathroom, she stops for few seconds and looks at the mirror. In a close-up shot we see her

direct and bold look at the mirror (Figure 4.12). Suddenly she becomes the subject and

object of the framing. The structuring presence of the male gaze is replaced by Bilkis's direct

gaze towards the camera. Her female gaze here re-enacts the analogy between the screen and

the mirror that emerged from Lacan's theory of the 'mirror stage', while simultaneously

denying it. According to Lacan, the 'mirror stage' is a stage of self knowledge in which the

child sees itself in the mirror an ideal image of a perfect body. This idealization is actually a

process of misrecognition, a narcissistic identification through which the child enters into the

social system. Many film critics, such as Christian Metz in his 1975 article 'The Imaginary

Signifier', draw on Lacan's mirror stage and link it with the screen. This analogy between

the screen and the mirror is drawn to explain the spectator-screen relation in which cinema

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[43] 'Male gaze' is the term for the male point of view coined by Laura Mulvey in her pioneering essay 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' (1975). Mulvey agues that classic narrative cinema constructs a male gaze, catering to male fantasies and pleasures. It also positions female character on screen with a passiveness. She is to drive pleasure for the male gaze in her construction as a spectacle to be looked at.

viewing represents a repetition of the Oedipal trajectory, and masculinizes the spectator. In her ground breaking essay 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', Laura Mulvey also describes 'the pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/ female' (1989: 19). However, here, Bilkis's gaze in the mirror denies the active male gaze, connoting her authority over the image and the narrative. It also forms an authentic recognition of female agency.
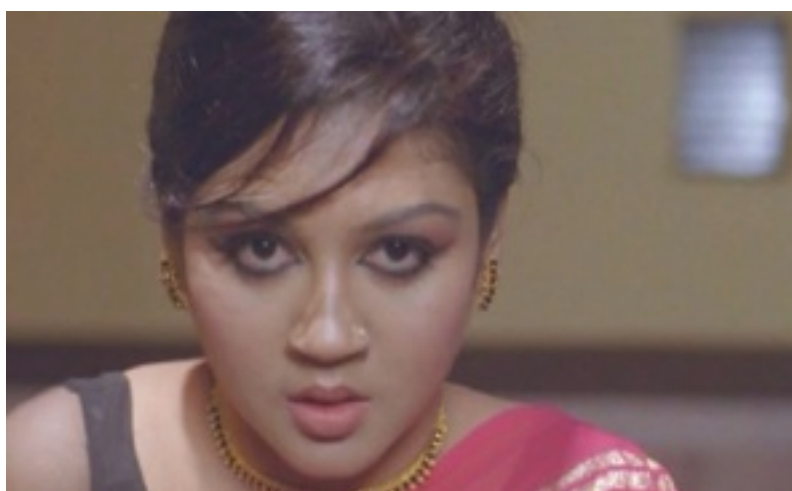
Figure 4.12 Bilkis's direct gaze at the mirror, implying her authority over the image and the narrative, in *Guerrilla* (2011).

Bilkis's agency in the film is also revealed through her resistance to the patriarchal cultural norms concerning femininity. During a carriage check at a train station, on her journey towards Joleswari, for example, we see the violent behavior of the Bengali collaborators towards the general public, and particularly to women who do not wear the veil. They reprimand such women with abusive language, seize their belongings, and finally take a woman by force to the army camp, suspecting her to be Hindu due to her being without a veil. We then hear a protest from Bilkis to the male sitting next to her.

Bilkis: A girl got picked up for no reason and you did not utter a word.
The man: It's a forbidden country now, we have to shut our mouth.

By this time the checking has finished and the train starts moving. Suddenly, a woman bursts into tears, having almost been caught by the collaborators for not having a veil. Bilkis then uncovers her face from her veil and takes it off as an utterly vivid expression of her protest against that abuse. When she then stands at the door and leans outside to inhale the air, a long shot of the moving train and Bilkis signifies her desire as (being) different. This desire is to find a space for herself as a woman to breath freely, without the mask of a veil, without the domination of patriarchy. Suddenly the notion of 'Liberation' for her appears to be that very space, towards which she and the train itself are moving.

Aside from Bilkis, we see two further female characters – Mrs Khan and Shahin – who are directly or indirectly involved in the guerrilla activities, receive Yousuff's proper attention. With some ambiguity, we find Mrs Khan, an upper class female with good connections to the Pakistani army, secretly helping the guerrillas by providing them with cars and other support. It is she who facilitates Bilkis's entry to the Army dinner party where she plants the explosive. Despite knowing that the bomb will soon explode, she sacrifices herself by remaining at the party and letting Bilkis leave, so that the army will not suspect anything about the bomb. After the explosion, at the time of death, Khan looks desperately for her son whom she has left at home. The other female combatant, Shahin, is also a mother. She uses her baby and its stroller to hide an audio spool of recorded songs destined for *Shadhin Bangla Betar Kendra* (Free Bengal Wireless Station) in India. One important aspect here is that these three female characters who are involved in guerrilla activities are not depicted without the association of their gendered roles. Bilkis is a passionate wife, while Mrs Khan and Shahin are mothers. These roles reveal the fact that the war was a people's war that engaged civilian women. At the same time, their roles subvert the cliché of the Western narrative of women bombers, portrayed in the media as 'improper' or unhappy women,

whose involvement in guerrilla activities is suggested to be due to a 'failed marriage' or 'inability to have children or a pregnancy' (Rajan 2011: 27).

In the portrayal of the non-combatant women we also see positive gestures towards their actions and attitudes toward the Liberation War. For example, Jhinu, the wife of Altaf Mahmud, who is depicted as a typical house wife, carries out a very important task. After the army arrests her husband, Jhinu runs towards Bilkis's house to inform her of the situation and to advise her to leave Dhaka. Another woman, Jaitun, the wife of Taslim Sardar (Biliks's brother-in-law), another typical housewife of old Dhaka as demonstrated by her constant chewing of betel-leaf, shows a sensitive attitude towards fellow countrymen of different religious belief. When the milkman accidentally reveals his name as 'Naren', which signifies his religious identity as Hindu, she warns Binni, the maid of the house, not to disclose it to anyone, in order to spare him from violence. However, even being a Muslim, Jaitun is raped by the Pakistani army, and Binni by the Bengali collaborators, unmasking the fact that the Bengali people regardless of their religious background were victimized by both the occupying force and Bengali collaborators during the war. This film uncovers the role of Bengali collaborators as rapists – something which was previously depicted as solely the act of the Pakistani army. The Bengali collaborators also sexuality humiliate Naren, the milkman, through his forced nudity.

What differences does *Guerrilla* introduce to the portrayal of rape victims? Do the rape victims face the normative fate of death? Or do they remain alive, disregarding the notion of shame? Is the visualisation of rape being used as an erotic objectification of the victim's body or appearance, as is evident in the earlier war movies of Bangladesh? Perceiving all of the above as frequent elements in the cinematic representation of rape victims, Yousuff avoids these aspects in a very skilful way. When Binni is attacked by Mannaf and his friend in abandoned premises, the camera tilts up from her and moves

towards the broken structure of the premises, connoting that she is abandoned (and perhaps ruined) like the site. But we hear her voice offscreen, expressing her outcry and failure to protect herself from them. Almost the same technique is used in the case of Jaitun, the wife of Moslem Sardar. When Sardar returns after securing Bilkis's journey to her village he finds his house surrounded by Pakistani soldiers and Bengali collaborators. Then he hears Jaitun's screaming inside a room, from which Captain Shamsad comes out, zipping up his uniform, clearly indicating that Jaitun has been raped by the Captain. We see a mixed expression of pain and shame in Sardar's face, having failed to protect his wife. Sardar's expression is erased when he is slaughtered by Tayeb, whom he raised in his house but is now a member of a *Shanti Committee*. We are not informed about the episodes following the rape of Jaitun or Binni, as the narrative then follows Bilkis through her journey towards Joleswari.

Figure 4.13 In the last sequence, Bilkis appears as the mythical character Kali, in *Guerrilla* (2011).

In the last sequence, when Bilkis is caught by the army, she appears as mythical character Kali (The Hindu goddess of destruction). This connotes Bilkis as violent and vicious, breaking the victimized and soft image of Bengali women portrayed in war films. In

this sequence, even after her appearance in grimy clothes, she is identified by Major Sarfarj as different to merely a village girl. Her English speaking capability sexually arouses Sarfaraj, and also leads him to suspect her of being an educated Hindu woman from India. However, when the Major is about to rape her, thinking that he is going to violate a Hindu woman and will produce Muslim children in her womb, she appears as Kali with an explosive in her hand (Figure 4.13). Her gothic look, the background music with its layering by the sound of a conch shell, the stroke of the dhak, the mandirā and the syllables of the bol, suddenly alter the mood of the scene – turning it into a ritual worship of Kali. Like Kali, Bilkis destroys the demon, killing Major Sarfaraj with the explosive and establishing her repressed female power or *Shakti* even by her death.

To the end, then, and despite its drive to redeem the female from her repressed position in the history of the Liberation War, this film cannot avoid re-enacting the patriarchal ideological framework of Bangladesh; in particular, its conception of a woman's sexual chastity as the dominant notion of femininity. This film gives relief and comfort to the audience as Bilkis avoids inevitable rape by the Pakistani army in exchange for her life (Gayen 2013: 115). Thus it returns to the melodramatic aesthetic – it enables us to comprehend, as Gledhill argues, 'the relation between ideology and popular culture as a mutual dynamic' (1995: 91). The end credits roll over the visuals of the explosion, accompanied by the song *Bolo bir, bolo chiro unnoto momo shir* ('Say valiant, say upright is my head eternally') by Kazi Nazrul Islam. This song reminds us that Bilkis is a *Bir* (war hero), not a *Birangona* (war heroine/rape survivor). As such, by employing this song, Yousuff clearly indicates the traditional divide between *Bir/ Birangona* and pride/ shame – and his point is to establish Bilkis as a figure of pride. However, although this film re-writes the official history in terms of finding agency for women in the Liberation War, given the contrived nature of the scene – in which Bilkis happens to find an explosive at the moment

she is about to be raped – it cannot fully reject the dominant discourse of Bangladesh that categorizes *Birangona* as shameful. Bilkis must die, rather than be raped; her purity cannot be compromised. The other female characters who are raped in this film, as described earlier, never appear in the movie again.

Despite this, *Guerrilla* should be regarded as a film with feminist overtones among Bangladeshi war films as it, for the first time, positions female subjectivity at the central to the war narrative. This subject agency of woman is negotiated by the intersection of history and the present manifestation of the political and cultural desires of Bangladesh, but at many levels this film deals with a search for a language for feminist film practice in Bangladesh – even if it is directed by a male.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have identified the hegemony of the state as one of the key factors that influences the representation of the Liberation War in mainstream films. The shifting ideologies of the state, governed by different political parties over the four decades that have followed the war, have constantly redefined the concept of 'nationalism'. Mainstream war films in most cases, like an ideological apparatus, have served the interest of the existing government due to their dependence on securing censorship certificates and budgetary support from the state. As these films are solely targeted at the Bangladeshi audience, they also reflect the contemporary desire of the society along with the established myth of the culture. In so doing, gender identities in mainstream war films are also formed in accordance with the societal view of men and women. Following the patriarchal thought of the society, men are constructed as the protectors of the nation who fight and die for the country, whereas women are represented stereotypically as the 'other', with supportive and passive roles. Women are bearers of national honour and are signified as nation. Despite the

valorization of the female as nation or motherland, mainstream war films elided female subjectivity by making her – both woman and nation – reliant upon rescuing by the male, the brave sons of *Banga Mata* (Mother Bengal). Since symbolization of 'mother' as 'nation' is one of the significant constructions of women in war films, this purity thus limits and problematizes the representation of the rape victims. Raped women have been constructed as polluted bodies, relegated to death or suicide at the end of the war films.

Kumkum Sangari states that 'female-ness is not an essential quality. It is constantly made, and redistributed'(cited in Sunder Rajan 1993: 129). Similarly, the cinematic construction of women has also not been static over the last 44 years since the war. In recent years, we have observed positive changes in the cinematic portrayal of women. Some films recognize the active contributions of women in the war. However, even these depictions of women in positive roles are constructed in a way that Teresa de Lauretis argues is not a signifier of women in a historical context, but rather of 'Woman' – 'a fictional construct' of male fantasy and myth (1984: 5).

While here I have examined how mainstream films have dealt with the issues of gender, the Liberation War, and nationalism, in the next chapter, I explore how such themes are depicted under the dynamic of the alternative films of Bangladesh.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Collages of the Past: Liberation War in Independent Films

Introduction

In Bangladesh, independent films refer to a certain kind of films made by young filmmakers who emerged from a movement during the middle of the1980s known as the 'Short Film Movement'. These films are committed to adopting strategies different from the practices associated with the mainstream film industry both in stylistic and economic terms. In order to earn greater freedom on screen, the directors of such films, in most cases, produce and distribute their films by themselves, avoiding the tyrannies of the producers and distributers of commercial films. As, initially, the filmmakers of this genre started to make short length films and documentaries on 16 mm and video formats with a low-budget, these films earned the localized term, 'Short Film'. Although many independent filmmakers have made a great deal of full length feature films, they are still regarded by the audience as 'Short Film' directors (Islam 2005: 55).

Like the counter cinema movement that took place in other Third World countries, the independent films of Bangladesh are created by the directors as forms of serious social art, in which they began to question the dominant state narratives as well as the system of representations of the mainstream films. In her article 'Marginal Cinemas and Mainstream Critical Theory' which appeared in *Screen*, Julianne Burton states that the Third World has always employed and explored the medium of film as an apparatus to cast 'a sense of national identity and cultural autonomy' (1985: 2). In a similar way, the independent films of Bangladesh as Third World cinemas have mostly concentrated on the shaping of national identities of Bangladesh through their depiction of history, myths, traditions and memories.

Initially independent filmmakers employed the process of identity formation in their films as a strategy to challenge the political system of the state that was seized by an autocratic ruler, General H. M. Ershad, during the 1980s (Mokammel 1991: 31; Mujarrad n.d.: 37). Ershad, who did not leave the service of the Pakistani army during the Liberation War and was repatriated to Bangladesh in 1973, promoted a singular version of the history of the Liberation War omitting the role of Mujib or the concept of Bengali nationalism during his military rule. As a result, the theme of the Liberation War appeared as a dominant leitmotif on the screens of alternative films during the Ershad regime to resist the official version of the history of the war. The directors addressed this issue, the depiction of various versions of the war, as a concern of shaping national identity in a time of need that was exploited by a military dictator. They have also endorsed the theme of the war as an essential element to revolt against Islamic fundamentalism that was indirectly backed by the state through its aim to form an Islamic Bangladesh. This aim of the government turned into a reality, when Islam was given the status of the state religion in 1988. Not only during the time of Ershad, but also over different periods since the removal of Ershad from power in 1990, independent filmmakers have depicted the theme of the Liberation War again and again as a means of maintaining national identity.

Independent filmmakers sometimes included allegories in their films, offering a hidden meaning in them. The allegorical cinematic expression was employed in these films not only to convey a political perspective, but also as a strategy to overcome the restrictions of state-imposed censorship. However, the theme of the Liberation War along with the contents of myths, cultural artifacts, traditions and the rural life of Bangladesh became central to the imagination of nation and national identity in the independent films, whether these films presented such themes in allegorical or in straightforward cinematic form. Eventually, the aesthetic strategy of presenting Bangladesh with iconographic images, which

initially was practised by this genre of films for shaping national identity, drew the attention of the foreign audiences, as since their inception, these films achieved access to various international film festivals. The screenings of the independent films in different international festivals opened the door for some filmmakers to receive foreign capital.

The aims of this chapter are to provide an overview of the independent filmmaking in Bangladesh, and to explore the aesthetic and ideological strategies of this film genre in representing gender and nation in the discourse of the Liberation War. Thus the questions I will probe in this chapter are: What are the essential qualities and alternative perspectives possessed by the independent films in explicating the national experience and history of the Liberation War? How differently have women been positioned and constructed from the mainstream films in the discourse of the Liberation War of independent films? How are gender relations or gender difference figured in these films? Why is the theme of the Liberation War central to Bangladeshi independent films? What visual strategies have these films adopted to depict the nation and national identity, and their relationships to women? How differently do the independent male and female directors represent gender, war and nationalism in their cinematic construction?

To account for the different forms of independent war films that focused distinctively on women and nation in the context of the Liberation over the past 30 years since their commencement, I have chosen three independent films from different periods for close analysis. These films are: *Agami* (The Time Ahead, 1984), *Muktir Gaan* (Song of Freedom, 1995), and *Shilalipi* (The Inscription, 2002). In terms of length and style these films contain diverse features, despite their broader classification as independent films. *Agami* is a short length fictional film directed by Morshedul Islam; *Muktir Gaan* is a documentary film by Tareque Masud and Catherine Masud made mostly with the archival footage shot by an American cinematographer and film director, Lear Levin, during the Liberation War; while

Shilalipi is a fictional film by a woman director, Shameem Akhtar. The motivation for selecting such films is two-fold: firstly, it is to cover a wide range of independent films; secondly, it is to compare and explore their critical attitude towards the past, women and nation in their diverse cinematic treatments. Moreover, these films contain the tensions and experiences of the different periods in which they have been produced. Besides the close analyses of these three films, I also discuss a number of other independent films from different periods by placing these films into their historical contexts. This contextualization will also help to understand the dynamism of the different periods and the deeper socio-political realities that influenced the cinematic memory of the Liberation War as outlined in independent films.

The aesthetic strategy

Most independent filmmakers of Bangladesh have a background of film society activism during the 1970s and 1980s, before starting their film making ventures (Islam 2008: 260-61). Regular screenings of the world famous masterpieces were one of the main activities of the film societies. This exposure to the world's films helped independent filmmakers to enrich their aesthetic sense of film. Moreover, they occasionally participated in different film appreciation workshops and training courses which helped them to broaden their cinematic intellect. Their filmmaking activities truly began after their participation in a film appreciation course organized by the Bangladesh Film Archive (BFA) in 1980, conducted by Alamgir Kabir (Johir 2014: n.p.). Although BFA is a state-owned organization, it did not simply propagate institutional norms for Bangladeshi filmmaking to the young filmmakers in attendance. Instead, the participants were immensely inspired by Kabir's cinematic views, his aesthetic sense, and his avoidance of the conventional features of Bangladeshi popular films. All of the above led to a feeling of close attachment to Kabir, and to the vigorous

pursuing of film projects on the part of these young activists, as we will see in the next section. They were also influenced by foreign films, particularly by Indian art cinema and Italian Neo-realism (Raju 2012: n.p.). Lotte Hoek notes that similar to the French New Wave cinema, the use of 16mm film, small crews and low budget in Bangladeshi independent films enabled the filmmakers to work independently (2014a: 26). She also says that these films 'inherited a concern with realism, [and] were delinked from the state bureaucracy of the FDC [Bangladesh Film Development Corporation]' (ibid.: 26).

Indeed, the creation of an impression of real life became a strong tendency of independent films; a trait adopted both from European films and Indian parallel cinema. The independent films of Bangladesh have mostly depicted the real lives of ordinary people from rural areas and in this they are similar to Indian parallel cinema, particularly those belonging to the 'Third Cinema' form and are characterized by the tendency to focus on the lives of real people and rural locations. In his article 'The Case of National Cinema' published in *Celluloid*, a well-known film magazine of Bangladesh, Mahmudul Hossain states that the beginning of alternative cinema in Bangladesh is like the 'motherly womb of national cinema' of this country (1999: 28). He says this because alternative films started to depict cultural objects of the country by their visualization of folk icons. Issues like women's suffering and the oppression of religious minority groups have tended to be focused upon with greater sensibility in such films. These films also concentrated on the portrayals of cultural heritage and indigenous traditions of Bangladesh in what they reckoned as a process of realist depiction emphasizing the spirit of Bengali nationalism.

At the beginning, to resist the pro-Islam move of the state during the Ershad regime, these films substantially endorsed the notion of Bengali nationalism as a means to challenge state-promoted Muslimness or fundamentalism. Later, an approach of depicting a negotiated and syncretic identity, comprising aspects of Bengaliness, Muslimness and popular religion,

is evident in independent films, particularly in *Matir Moina* (The Clay Bird, 2002) by Tareque Masud (Haq 2009: 81). However, in both earlier and later productions, the theme of the Liberation War became the recurring and key defining subject of these films. The projection of such themes in independent films created a sense of distinctive and authentic ethnic atmosphere of Bangladesh, which served both local and foreign audiences.

I will argue and explain this aesthetic strategy for capturing such themes for the projection of 'ethno-symbolic' images of Bangladesh, by using the concept of 'primitive passion' coined by Rey Chow. Writing about Chinese Fifth Generation films, Chow explains 'primitivism' as a nostalgic portrayal of the past, a way of rewriting history, which was employed by the Fifth Generation filmmakers in their obsession with projecting China as simultaneously 'victim and empire' (1995: 19-23). Thus 'primitive' (in Fifth Generation films) expresses both the backwardness of China as a Third World country and its strength as an ancient civilization. Chow identifies the period as a moment of cultural crisis when the phantasmagoria of the primitive occurs. In such time the predominant signifiers of traditional culture faces a challenge with the emergence of vast and newly technologized visual systems. In her discussion of 'primitivism', Chow also refers to the paradoxical relation of West and China, where modern Chinese culture is 'caught between the forces of "first world" imperialism and "third world" nationalism' (ibid.: 23). In filmic representation of twentieth century modern China, the process of commodification is a common feature where socially oppressed classes like women have been captured as 'primitive materials'. The Chinese Fifth generation filmmakers, purposely negotiated a self-exoticization, a cultural exhibition of China by their projection of rural locations and poor populations, which according to Chow, is a process of the 'oriental's orientalism' (ibid.: 171). This self-projection is targeted to feed an urban audience unfamiliar with such traditions and to meet the demands of a Western audience by providing an otherness. She says:

Like their counterparts from many areas of the non-Western world, contemporary Chinese films, even though they are always made with the assumption that they represent the ongoing problems within China, become the space where "China" is exhibited in front of audiences overseas (ibid: 37).

I want to link Chow's concept of 'primitive passion' to the visual strategies of the Bangladeshi independent films, in which the tactic of exoticizing the national history and culture as 'primitive' or unique is evident.[44] Initially, the independent films of Bangladesh employed the theme of the Liberation War, national myths, rural locations, as essential elements to resist the cultural crisis of the 1980s. Later, these films incorporated strategies to gain the attention of overseas audiences. In accordance with the projection of the theme of the Liberation War these films included women's oppression and different cultural traditions as 'primitive materials' to exoticize the national images. They often sexualized the representation of national history and images by projecting women's suffering as the emblem of the nation. However, their passion for projecting the past enables the independent directors to express their personal memories as well as the collective memories of the war. In her analysis of 'primitive passion', Chow suggests 'primitive', as a nostalgic visualization of the past, was a key feature of Chinese New Cinemas – a means through which the directors manifested their nostalgic memory of the past. In a similar fashion, independent film directors of Bangladesh have chosen the theme of the Liberation War to convey a vivid chapter of their life that was lost. Tanvir Mokammel, a pioneering first generation

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[44] In 2014, in my article 'Panning from the Past to the Present: The Climate, Context and Concept of Bangladeshi National Cinema', which appeared in *Shilpakala*, I discussed how the aesthetic strategy of independent films embraced a self-orientalism like the Chinese Fifth Generation films, using Chow's concept of 'primitive passion' (Akhter 2014: 62-63). Later, in 2015, Zakir Hossain Raju also refers to this tendency of the independent films of Bangladesh, borrowing Chow's ideas very briefly, while mentioning it as a 'self-exoticized' attempt to address progressive audiences in the West (Raju 2015: 198).

independent film director of Bangladesh, explains their passion for the past as an impulse to express their own childhood memories:

> It is curious to see that most of these short-film-makers began their careers by venturing at least one film on the backdrop of 1971. The reason seems self-evident as during the 1971 war most of these young film-makers were in their boyhood, in their most sensitive and formative years. So the trauma they had experienced, resulted in the 1971 war appearing again and again in their films, almost like a leitmotif (Mokammel 2013: 392).

The directors have dealt with the history of the Liberation War and cultural heritage to reveal their firm 'passion' for the past through cinematic signs. Like Fifth Generation filmmakers of China, they also represented the nation through allegorical structures, using myths, iconic images and symbols.

In visual technique and narrative level, these films tried to create an experimental cinematic language that, in most cases, is different from the dominant war cinema's system of representation. For example, the absence of heroes, happy endings and popular star casting are the predominant features of these films. The directors mostly utilized non-linear plots, complex characterization, location shooting with non-professional actors and actresses to depict social and psychological realism, following the expression of European and Indian art cinemas. However, these films did not reject fully the dominant films' norms, as they also mixed in melodramatic conventions in their depiction of idealized images of Bangladesh and female suffering. They sometimes adopted the polarized good and evil mechanism of melodrama through their portrayals of *Razakar*s (Bengali collaborators) as villainous and freedom fighters as good, and equally seek to involve audience emotions by the wide-ranging use of music. However, in many instances, they rejected the prevailing idea of

family, which is evident in mainstream films as a crucial component of melodramatic expression to depict patriarchal moral values. The mainstream war films linked family, home and nation, emphasizing a union between family members after the war. Conversely, in alternative films, families are torn apart to the end, either because of one member's death (*Agami*), divorce/separation of the spouses (*Shilalipi*), or, because of the rigid views of the head of the family, which create a distance between him and other family members (*Matir Moina*). This broken feature of the family is brought to signify the cultural crisis of the nation, which also stimulated the decay of the ethos of the Liberation War.

Early independent war films (1984-1990)

Many alternative film practitioners/activists of Bangladesh believe that the practice of alternative film making truly began in Bangladesh during the Liberation War through the effort of Zahir Raihan in his making of *Stop Genocide* (Mokammel 2013: 390; Murad 2004: 3). However, *Agami* (*The Time Ahead*, 1984) and *Hooliya* (*Wanted*, 1985) are regarded as marking the beginning of the venture through which the 'Short Film Movement' started its journey in Bangladesh (Raju 2012: n.p.). As mentioned above, many of the independent filmmakers actually emerged from Alamgir Kabir's film appreciation course at the BFA in 1980 (Johir 2014: n.p.). The young film activists, such as Morshedul Islam, Tanvir Mokammel, Tareque Masud and Shameem Akhtar, as a result of participating in this course, declared their future actions towards an alternative film making venture by avoiding the commercial film industry's producer-distributer nexus. Then they started making films with a low-budget using 16 mm film format. Thus, as part of their initial ventures, two films *Agami* by Morshedul Islam and *Hooliya* by Tanvir Mokammel – were made.

Both these films have centered on the historical past of Bangladesh. *Agami* illustrates the decay of the ethos of the Liberation War in the context of the1980s, while *Hooliya* is set

against the late 1960s backdrop of East Pakistan to reveal the political turmoil of the period under the military dictatorship of General Ayub Khan. They both have critiqued the contemporary political context of the 1980s, when state power was seized by an autocratic ruler, Ershad, through their indirect depiction of the causes and consequences of dictatorship. It is needless to say that the political reality of the 1980s enhanced the possibilities of initiating such film practices in Bangladesh.

The Ershad regime was regarded as a period of cultural crisis when basic civil rights were curtailed. The interpretation of national identity involved a state-promoted appropriation of Muslimness which was given more importance than Bengaliness, the ethno-linguistic and cultural identity of the nation. Islam was adopted as the state religion during this period. The history or memory making process of the Liberation War through different cultural artifacts, media and text books was directed at creating conflicting stories opposing to the ethos of Bengali nationalism.

During this period, the film industry also fell into decay. Here it needs to be mentioned that a few years earlier in 1980, the Bangladesh government permitted the importation of video-players which slowly became one of the main means of entertainment for the Bangladeshi audience during this era. The easy availability of Bollywood films on video tapes (VHS) restrained the audience, particularly the middle-class audience, from going to cinema theaters to watch Bangladeshi films. For the less well-off audiences, in rural and urban areas, some illegal or hidden outlets were erected to project Bollywood films by playing them on video-players. A study conducted in 1984, revealed the existence of 425 government-approved theaters across Bangladesh and 50 illegal mini-theaters in Dhaka which were built to screen foreign films on VCR and VCPs (Islam 2008: 94). Besides this, from the city to remote villages, there proliferated video shops and video libraries, which

loaned Bollywood films for only Tk 10 to 15, ranging from latest releases to old hits.[45] Other

than Bollywood films, there were also some foreign films available on VHS formats, which

included films from Hong Kong, Thailand and Hollywood.

However, this enormous exposure to Bollywood films had largely affected the

mainstream industry. Most of the films of this period copied badly the contents and styles of

Bollywood films. Consequently, the middle-class audience had lost interest in such poorly

made Bangladeshi films of this period and left the cinema theaters. They only had the

Bangladesh Television (BTV) and home videos on which to depend for their entertainment.

So, it was evident that the socio-political context during the regime of Ershad (1982-90) had

reached in a crisis point similar to Chow's observation of the period when Chinese New

Wave films appeared to depict the phantasmagoria of the primitive or the past. Like the

Chinese New Wave films, Bangladeshi independent films emerged at a time of serious

political turmoil, when they re-appropriated socio-cultural history, particularly the historical

episode of the Liberation War, along with the projection of the nation through iconic images

and myths in their cinematic ventures. Some film critics interpret these cinematic endeavors

as the directors' striving and struggle for democracy and also for a better cinema, concurring

with their strong nationalistic emotions (Hossain 1999: 26, 31).

Along with producing their films, the directors of early independent films

themselves had to establish their own distribution strategies and networks. These films were

only screened in non-commercial venues. In Dhaka, the Central Public Library auditorium

became the central venue where regular screening of these films took place under the

supervision of the directors. Furthermore, different institutions affiliated with foreign

embassies offered support for screening the independent films, among which the Goethe-

Institute, Russian Cultural Centre and High Commission of India's contribution were

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[45] Tk is the shorter version of Taka (Bangladeshi currency).

noteworthy. During the 1970s to 1980s, an adequate number of middle-class audience, who had emerged from the film society movements in Dhaka, warmly received these early independent films. This audience was deprived of watching good international films as the film society activities were disrupted by the Film Society Registry and Control Act, passed in 1980 (Islam 2008: 254-55). These films offered 'real hope' for the middle-class audience, as they were deprived of having any other entertainment facilities, except for their access to the BTV (Mujarrad n.d.: 37). However, it needs to be mentioned that among the middle-class audience, the university-going students, the progressive cultural activists from the left-liberal civil society known as *budhdhijibi*s (intellectuals) were the main audience of the independent films.

These films were also screened in divisional or district towns on different occasions, such as on Independence Day, Bengali New Year's day, and other significant national days. For these types of screenings, the directors sometimes had to take the support and services from different cultural networks or students' organizations. For example, Tanvir Mokammel, in order to project his film in divisional head quarters, utilized the network of the Communist Party of Bangladesh (CPB), as he had direct links and involvements with this party (Mujarrad n.d.: 37).

With the formation of the Bangladesh Short Film Forum (BSFF) in August 1986, the Short Film Movement gained momentum, as it launched a platform for young independent film activists and directors. At the beginning, the BSFF declared its aim to assist the short film making in Bangladesh by adopting some issues as their specific agenda. Among them the following concerns are significant:

> To help and establish 16mm short film making as an alternative or parallel cinema to [that] of 35mm [...]. To develop an alternative network for the exhibition of Short

Films […]. To preserve the present pro people and progressive characteristic in the film making […]. To maintain contact and express solidarity in the movements of alternative makings in the part of third world […]. To express [their] solidarity with the anti fundamentalism and democratic struggle of [their] people along with the struggle against all forms of social injustice (cited in Murad 2004: 14).

The BSFF's organized the 1st International Short Film Festival, in Dhaka in 1988. The festival was a successful event and served as an outlet for the independent filmmakers to showcase their work alongside the international art films from different parts of the world. The festival's slogan for many years has been and still is – 'Free Cinema, Free Expression'. Different international leading figures, who are also practising independent film making, are invited regularly to the different events of the festival.

The aesthetics of imaging time (past, present and future) in *Agami* (1984)

Morshedul Islam's *Agami* (The Time Ahead, 1984) focusing on the theme of the Liberation War, is Bangladesh's first alternative film, made outside the circuit of commercial film production. The film was pioneering in investing the memory of the Liberation War with allegorical potential in order to interpret the socio-political condition of present-day Bangladesh under the military dictatorship of General H. M. Ershad. In line with the film's title, which literally translates as 'future', this short fiction film expresses a desire for a future different to the actual present. At the same time, it returns repeatedly to the memory of the past, the history of the Liberation War, which has been blurred and misinterpreted by a haunted present. Linear temporality is interrupted by a constant collapsing of past and present into each other through the treatment of storytelling and flashbacks. This disruption of the linear progression of time, I will argue, is employed to serve a nationalistic purpose,

offering an insight into the psychic condition of contemporary Bangladesh and its socio-political crisis under the military dictatorship of General Ershad.

During Ershad's era the ethos of the Liberation War was waning. The period also saw the return of war criminals (Bengali collaborators) to the political arena with the state's support. As a third-worldist film, *Agami* resists the state's efforts to eradicate the memory of the history of the Liberation War. The film transports viewers back and forth between the past and the present through the use of flashbacks. These flashbacks embody a personalized vision of the nation's history, a metaphoric representation of the nostalgia and memories of a crippled freedom fighter, Jadu, who lost his one leg in the war, and finds himself alienated from the present.

Figure 5.1 Jadu's feminized portrayal: physical disability matched by his inability to protect his friend from a *razakar*'s feudal exploitation in *Agami* (1984).

Although, like popular Bangladeshi war films, *Agami* centers on a male protagonist, the film does not emphasize the power and heroic posturing of its lead character. He is, rather, feminized (or shown as passive) via his disabled condition. Along with this physical deficiency, Jadu's inability to protest against the sordid actions of a *razakar* depicts the

powerless condition of a freedom fighter in the contemporary Bangladeshi political context. The normative identification of the male protagonist as the authority figure in a (paternal) family is also   called into question by the film. Jadu's inability to play the role of an omnipotent father figure to his son who fought in the war and liberated the country but who is now unable to protect his fellow freedom fighter from the feudal exploitation enforced by the Razakar, denotes the crisis of manhood and unstable subject position of the freedom fighters during the Ershad period. Finally, the militant opposition to the domination of the war criminals is taken up by the next generation. Jodu's teenage son Hashu's decision to throw a stone at the Razakar, Badar Munshi, represents both the necessity and hope for a change in the political situation.

Figure 5.2 Hashu, as the future of Bangladesh: brave enough to protest against a *razakar,*
        in *Agami* (1984).

As an exemplar of an alternative mode of production, *Agami* adopts a critical approach to its subject matter by associating the figure of the war hero with passivity and lack, thereby mirroring the period's traumatic political reality, during which democracy was shattered. What is most important in this respect is how this revision of the characteristics of

the war hero offers a new perspective on the inscription of femininity in the discourse around the Liberation War, drawing on both female Bangladeshi's subjectivity and their contribution to the war itself. Kaja Silverman states: 'large-scale reconfiguration of male identification and desire would […] permit female subjectivity to be lived differently' (Silverman 1992: 2-3). As *Agami* breaks with the image of masculinity traditionally associated with the figure of the war hero, can we see Silverman's claim reflected in the film's portrayal of femininity? In analysing the film, my main concern is to understand how a film like *Agami*, with its oppositional cultural politics and socialist commitment, constructs women. I will also be raising the question: how does *Agami*, a film with the aspiration of creating an alternative mode of cinematic language, and which aims to bring about reform in Bangladesh's socio-political condition, deal with the issues of gender, nation, and memory during a period of pronounced political turmoil?

As I noted at the beginning of this chapter, most of the Bangladeshi independent filmmakers had a background in film society activism, Morshedul Islam, the director of *Agami*, emerged from the same film society movement. Before making his debut with *Agami*, Islam was an active member of the Chalachchitram Film Society, the society which was ultimately to produce *Agami* itself. Before the film's release in 1984, the authorities of the Bangladesh Film Censor Board initially refused to issue a censorship certificate for *Agami*. The film's use of the words 'Joi Bangla', 'razakar', 'Pakistan' and various pieces of rural slang in the film's dialogue were cited as the main reasons for the Board's refusal to issue the film with a certificate (Islam 2008: 174).[46] Artists, journalists, political leaders, and *budhdhijibi*s (intellectuals) criticized government authorities for imposing such restrictions

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[46] *Joi Bangla* (victory to Bengal) were the prominent words of the historical speech of Shiekh Mujibur Rahman, delivered on 7 March 1971. During the period of General Ziaur Rahman (1976-1981), the words, like *Joi Bangla*, that derived from linguistically Bengali origin were replaced by words like 'Bangladesh Zindabad', including many words(for example, Zinadabad) from Urdu, Arabic or Persian origin. The use of such words were to emphasise the Muslim cultural feature of Bangladeshi nationalism, which also continued during the Ershad regime (1982-90).

on the film (Eusuf 1984: 48). They expressed their strong reaction to the decision in a variety of media, demanding permission for the film to be screened. The government's anti-Liberation politics were seen by these commentators and activists as the main reason for *Agami*'s having been refused certification.

The Ershad government had enlisted war criminals in its political activities and embraced Islam as the state religion. The portrayal of *razakar* as a devoted Muslim also contributed to the film's unfavorable treatment by the authorities. In portraying the *razakar* in this way, the film went against the state-prescribed nationalist image according to which Muslim identity takes precedence over other form of Bengali identity linked with a secular and ethno-cultural identity. The film society 'Better Film Front' organized a meeting and screening of *Agami* on 10 January 1984, at the Film Archive auditorium, where the group called for the film's immediate release. The meeting was well-attended by film and cultural activists, and was effective in achieving its stated aims (Eusuf 1984: 47-8). The society's demand for *Agami* to be screened helped put pressure on the government to release the film. Finally, on 3 February 1984, *Agami* obtained a certificate for screening from the Bangladesh Film Censor Board.

Stylistically, *Agami* adheres to neo-realist cinema conventions through its focus on the oppression of ordinary people from rural settings, use of location shooting, long takes, natural lighting, and its casting of non-professional performers in most of its character roles. These practices constitute an alternative aesthetic to that of more mainstream cinema with its associated socio-political commitments. Yet it is also evident that the film does not fully reject the more melodramatic ingredients of Bangladeshi popular film. For example, the film's polarized representations of freedom fighters as 'good' and collaborators as 'evil', its use of background music to intensify the mood of certain scenes and to stimulate the audience's emotions, its idealization of feminine qualities and aligning of femininity with

suffering and sacrifice, and its use of flashbacks to disrupt the linear progression of time, are all ways in which the film can be seen to borrow techniques and formal devices from mainstream Bangladeshi cinema. Despite its portrayal of the lives of real and rural Bangladeshi communities, and its use of a range of neo-realist cinema practices, *Agami* can be argued to give rise to a hybrid mode of realism, accommodating aspects of formalism, melodrama, nationalist drama, and allegory. This hybrid mode of realism plays a key role in the film's distinctive political aesthetic.

Knowing the censorship constraints imposed by the state, and the risk of the film being banned if it was seen to go against government policy and ideology, Islam was not able to portray the political reality of the Ershad period directly in his film. He instead employs an alternative cinematic strategy for depicting national allegories by combining different aspects of realism and melodrama. This mixed mode of realism is shared by *Agami*, which, through its exploration of the contemporary political/national crisis, suggests ways in which dominant ideas of family and masculinity might be reformed. In the end, it provokes a collective struggle and hope for change in the state-promoted history of the Liberation War and its new Islamized national identity through personal story.

Agami begins with a mid close-up shot of a wounded bird. The opening shot is taken with a 'frame within a frame' composition through the sides of two standing children. Next, an arial shot shows us a circle of teenagers, a mixture of boys and girls, looking at the wounded bird. Hashu and a girl from the group give the bird water and help it to fly again. Before letting it go, Hashu, along with a number of other boys and girls, rises from his sitting position with the bird in the palm of his hand, with the clear aim of letting it fly free. There is then a break in the continuity of the editing of the sequence. Three times, from three different angles, the same action is captured, each time with a further break in continuity. We might be tempted to see these breaks in continuity as technical faults, breaking up the logical

coherence of the sequence and disrupting the naturalistic illusion. I would suggest, however, that these repetitions are devices whereby the film emphasizes its own metaphoric significance: by feeding and freeing the bird, the teenagers, representing the next generation of Bangladeshis, are helping to nurture the ethos of the Liberation War and restore their wounded country's democracy.

The next, wide-framed shot, which is accompanied by upbeat folk music, is used to accentuate the sense of the bird's newfound freedom. From this, the film cuts to a perspective and profile shot of Hashu and his female companion, who are looking on joyfully as the bird ascends. At this point the title is displayed: *Agami*. The credits that follow are then intercut with shots of the boys and girls swimming and climbing and jumping between trees.

This opening/pre-title sequence therefore functions as a microcosm for the film as a whole, signaling the desire for an unattained but hoped-for future where both boys and girls, men and women, might live peacefully together. This desired future can be compared with the notion of *Sonar Bangla* (Golden Bengal) that was dreamed by the Bengalis before independence. The dream for a glorious golden Bengal, however, was not attained after independence. Thus, *Agami* in its opening sequence signals a future that will bring the utopia of *Sonar Bangla* in reality and this future making process will be led by the new generation. Relevant here to note that Cinema can signal different meanings beyond the text, even when a film depicts outwardly humdrum realities. Reality can, of course, never be fully captured by the medium of cinema; it can only be simulated via a variety of material techniques. It creates an illusion which resembles real life insofar as it translates the three-dimensional real world to a two-dimensional screen image. Despite being generally and for the most part a realist film, *Agami*'s opening sequence departs from the conventions of realism. It appeals

directly to the viewer's imagination and desire by gesturing metaphorically towards a hopeful future.

One question we might ask here is that of how this metaphoric opening sequence is able to communicate the particular meaning it does. A metaphor, after all, can typically carry a range of different meanings. Here it is important to recall that no film can be either culturally or politically neutral. The historical context and wider socio-political conditions of a film are therefore essential for understanding its meaning. So, this is no less true that the symbolic meanings of metaphors also exist within specific cultural traditions and political context, and can be introduce to the film language. As Jean Mitry has observed, cinematic metaphors tend to bring together,

> contrasting facts and actions in juxtapositions, [and which are] created most often in editing and whose connotations always have to be deciphered. The metaphor is not presented; it only exists as such (its meaning) in the mind of the audience.[…] Thus, every metaphor presented as such in a film appears as alien, outside the action (2000: 197).

Despite appearing 'alien' to the action of a film, a metaphor is able to resonate with an audience as long as they have some familiarity with the socio-cultural context in which it was produced. It is for this reason that the opening sequence of *Agami* is immediately comprehensible to a Bangladeshi audience. To Bangladeshi viewers, the metaphorical significance of the sequence, whereby the collective fears and desires of the Ershad era are conveyed, is readily apparent.

A second metaphor for the country's political crisis is then introduced. After the title screen, the film establishes a link between the oppression of women and the national crisis. Kulsum, who was sexually victimized by Badar Munshi, the head of her village and a

razakar, is punished for adultery. Drawing on the authority of the village's *grammo shalish*[47], Munshi himself imposes the punishment on Kulsum in response to her sexual violation. This involves an order for Kulsum having her head shaved before she is thrown out of the village. Knowing that Munshi sexually abused her, no villagers dare to protest against this unfair treatment. Except for Hashu who protests against this injustice by throwing a small stone at the face of Badar Munshi from a distance using his catapult, the villagers observe her humiliation quietly, making her an object of their distancing gaze. In this way, Kulsum's victimization helps to generate sympathy among the audience for the plight of oppressed oriental women. This sympathy can be compared with Chow's notion of 'Primitive Passion'. Primitive Passion is the result of a process whereby the past is translated into a cinematic sign system in which an 'othering' of socially oppressed groups, such as oriental women, takes place through the treatment of their experiences as so much 'primitive material' (Chow 1995: 21). In *Agami,* the inclusion of the abuse of Kulsum implies a degree of primitivism and backwardness on the part of the Bangladeshi rural population, exposing, in particular, its oppression of women. Through the portrayal of Kulsum, the film transforms the exotic image of an oriental woman into a primitive sign.

A further example of this is provided by the first sequence in which Kulsum appears. Kulsum is shown sewing at night. Whilst she sews, she is unable to cover her impoverished body which, lacking a blouse, is only just covered by a Sari (Figure 5.3). The mise-en-scène of the sequence, Kulsum's partially exposed body, her slow movements as she sews, the natural low key lighting of a kerosine lamp, and the background noise of crickets lend it a sense of sad remoteness. We then hear the whisper of Lokman, an assistant of Munshi, coming from outside. Lokman proposes to Kulsum that she leave the village. Once again, the film can be seen as enacting an allegory of the treatment of women under oppressive

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[47] *Grammo shalish* is village court system

Bangladeshi village tradition. Kulsum's experiences here are processed as 'primitive material' both in through the way she is visually presented and through her manifest sense of helplessness and inability to escape from her oppressive situation. Initially, we hear her as she refuse to leave the village at night when Lokman instructs her to do so; but at the *Shalish,* she possesses nothing but a silent passiveness, obeying the order of the *Shalish* unquestioningly.

Figure 5.3 Kulsum's first appearance, suggesting an oppressed image of a Bangladeshi woman in *Agami* (1984).

The other female characters in *Agami* are likewise represented as being both 'primitive' and passive figures. These characters stand for both the socio-political crisis of the time and the history by their victimization. Jadu's wife depicts the episode and plight of a raped woman in the discourse of the Liberation War. The normative strategy of the popular film to a rape victim which is to allocate an exclusion to her from the narrative is also evident in *Agami*. Having been unable to commit suicide in the knowledge that she is carrying Jadu's child, Jadu's wife (we do not hear her name in the film) later dies as a result of complications following from childbirth. This narrative device for dispensing with rape

victims is a common treatment in mainstream Bangladeshi war films, as I showed in the Chapter Three of this study.

Before Jadu's wife is raped by the military, we see her and her husband having sex. The scene is structured in such a way as to be expressive of sexual pleasure, with a view to revealing the reality selectively. In the context of Bangladesh, where kissing, for instance, is banned from being shown on screen, realistic depictions of sex in cinema are obviously impossible. As a result, Islam has to construct the scene between Jadu and his wife very carefully in order for his film to conform to censorship constrains. Along with background music, the sexual act is evoked via partial shots of selected body parts. Thus the scene neither becomes 'obscene', nor could subvert the 'visual pleasure' of mainstream fiction films. In her groundbreaking article, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema'(1989 [1975]), Laura Mulvey argues that 'visual pleasure' is a common code of mainstream Hollywood cinema. Reproducing patriarchal ideology, 'visual pleasure' in mainstream cinema is 'split between active/male and passive/female' principles (1989: 19). Mulvey claims that narrative cinema always positions its spectator as male, catering to male fantasies and desires, with women positioned as passive erotic objects. This familiar mechanism of mainstream cinema is apparent in the erotic exchange between Jadu and his wife. Here, Jadu is positioned as a masculine subject whilst his wife is locked in his desiring gaze, appearing exclusively as an object 'to-be-looked-at' and responding to her husband's demands passively and compliantly.

Although this intimate scene to some extent reproduces the patriarchal ideology of mainstream narrative cinema by integrating the male gaze and denying female subjectivity, it nevertheless at some point breaks with the illusory 'seamless realism' usually found in such

cinema (Hayward 2000a: 311).[48] The 'visual pleasure' of the sex scene is next disrupted by the insertion of war imagery. In cutting back and forth between erotic and violent images, the sequence forms a collage connoting two births: the first is the birth of Bangladesh itself through war; the other is the birth of Hashu through the coupling of Jadu and his wife. The main purpose of the scene is arguably to confirm Jadu's fatherhood. Islam needs to include this scene in order to firmly establish the identity of Hashu, who is representative of the next generation of Bangladeshis. In order to maintain a sense of national purity, and in line with patriarchal ideology, Hashu must be shown to be the legitimate heir of an identifiable, Bengali father, and not a rootless, orphaned war child. Although her mother's purity has been violated, Hashu remains pure for the authenticity of the nation and national identity. It thus reproduces the national phenomenon of Bangladesh that always refused to accept war children. According to Maleka Begaum, a social worker involved in the rehabilitation of rape victims in the aftermath of the War, 30,000 war babies were born during the first three months of 1972 before being assigned to adoptive parents through an institutional program, disregarding their mothers' own stated wishes (Mohsin 2004: 20). This mass adoption effort was carried out following the order of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the Father of the nation of Bangladesh. His directions in the matter reflect his patriarchal ideology:

> Send the children, who have no identity of their father abroad. Let the children of human beings grow up like proper human being. Besides I do not want to keep that polluted blood in this country (Ibrahim 1998: 22).

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[48] Susan Hayward distinguishes between two types of realism: one is seamless realism, the other is aesthetically motivated realism. Seamless realism functions ideologically in disguising the illusory nature of cinematic reality and is more often found in classic narrative cinema. Aesthetically motivated realism is more often in evidence in the narration of art cinema. (2000a: 311).

Although *Agami* to a certain extent reproduces the patriarchal values of the Bangladeshi society by assigning Hasu a clear, patrilineal identity, it does not in fact affirm Jadu's authority as father. In patriarchal societies, the (paternal) family is encoded so as to always privilege the male over the female, identifying the father as the head of the family. Silverman, in her conception of 'dominant fiction', identifies the family as the essential element which forms and maintains traditional individual and group identities. The influence of the organization of the family extends to the wider framework of a nation, maintaing and affirming the authority of classic masculinity and patriarchy. During the process of Bangladesh's formation, following in the codes of a (patriarchal) family the supreme authority of one father figure, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, was much in evidence. However, in the case of Jadu we see notably the portrayal of a weak father, offering a collapse of faith in traditional masculinity and family. Jadu's inability to safeguard his friend from the exploitation of Badar Munshi exposes him before his son as an incapable father. It thus reveals a crisis of male authority which can be compared with Silverman's conception of 'historical trauma'. Silverman defines 'historical trauma' as a collective loss of belief in the penis-phallus equation, as well as in other aspects of the 'dominant fiction'. A historical trauma, according to Silverman, is an event in which a male collective suffers from a sense of lack and is brought to recognize flaws in its masculinity (1992: 55). The period immediately following the Second World War is often depicted in Hollywood cinema as one such example of a period of 'historical trauma', in which war heroes are usually portrayed as the bearers of either psychological or physical wounds. This wound or 'lack' in the male subject reflects both the personal trauma inflicted by war and the suffering of the wider society. In *Agami*, the nation's 'historical trauma' is mirrored in Jadu's own physical and psychic lack. It is also apparent in the film's questioning of the dominant Bangladeshi conception of the family.

Jadu repeatedly returns to his memories of the Liberation War through flashbacks, partly in order to escape his present reality in which his opponent in the war has risen to the rank of head of state. Jadu's mother, also narrates her memories of the war by telling stories to Hashu. Through her story telling, she is able to bring to mind the heroic postures of her son during the war. This is also a strategy to escape the traumatized present where her son is now disabled by his war wounds.

However, finally, the attempt to change of the traumatized present is taken by the new generation. When Jadu's friend, Azmat is denied a loan by Munshi, and Jadu is also incapable to do anything against this exploitation, Hashu picks a stone to throw it to Munshi. He is, however, then restrained by Jadu from throwing the stone. Next, the sequence flows to different events of the past through flashbacks from the perspective of Jadu and finally ends to his imagination for a future, heading to the very desired utopia of *Sonar Bangla*, in which a band of children are running in a new dawn.

Ultimately, *Agami* is an optimistic film. Despite its portrayal of the freedom fighters as beset by a sense of lack and fatigue, the film evokes hope for the future and a desired *Sonar Bangla*, deriving from the ethos of the Liberation War. As Islam's first feature film, *Agami* does not represent the peak of its director's aesthetic achievement. It is evident throughout the film that Islam is trying to search for a new cinematic language, but not being able to reject fully the norms of mainstream Bangladeshi film. Thus the film's realist mode incorporates many ingredients of melodrama and allegories. The political condition of the 1980s led Islam to infuse visuals signs into the reinterpretation of hegemonic political and historical discourses. Although *Agami*'s political value transcends its aesthetic limitations and comparatively low production values, female representation still remains in this film as an emblem of Bangladesh's suffering.

Independent war films in the 1990s (1990−2000)

1990 was a year of fresh start for democratic Bangladesh. The military regime of General H.M. Ershad was dislodged through widespread and inclusive *Gono-obbhuthan* (popular uprisings). Students, various cultural activists, journalists and middle-class professionals actively participated alongside political leaders of opposition in the mass protest against Ershad, which finally brought his rule to an end and forced the return of democracy in Bangladesh. The alternative film makers were also very active in the struggle for democracy. This transition period left a deep mark on their ideas profoundly. As a result we see that many independent filmmakers made films immediately after the *Gono-obbhuthan* on this theme of the mass movement and the Liberation War.

After the overthrow of the autocratic Ershad, people were eagerly hoping for a positive change in the political arena, along with a renewal of democratic practices. Eventually, the BNP formed the government after their victory in a reasonably free and fair election in 1991. I have already mentioned this aspect in Chapter Three that the BNP government maintained an ideological coalition with JI (Jamaat-e-Isalmai). In 1992, to head the JI, Golam Azam was able to return to Bangladesh from Pakistan with state support, despite having lost citizenship rights since independence due to his collaboration with the Pakistani army in mass killings of Bengalis during the war (Lewis 2011: 92).

Slowly, the BNP government through its different activities, for example, its support for JI, showed its unwillingness to reinstate the unfinished political agenda relating to the prosecution of war criminals. Thus between 1991 and 1996, when the BNP was in power histories of the Liberation War did not receive much encouragement from the state. I have also mentioned in Chapter Three that in this period only one mainstream war film, *Aguner Poroshmoni* (1994) by the popular writer Humayun Ahmed received government funding. In contrast, no alternative filmmakers received any funding or grants from the government,

while alternative films in this period acted as a dominant force to shape the perception of the Liberation War. Moreover, some independent films on the theme of the war faced restrictions from the government for having a censorship certificate for screening. *Muktir Gaan* (Song of Freedom, 1995) is one of the examples which struggled to obtain a screening certificate. A rising demand from the critics, journalists and writers of Bangladesh helped this film to secure the certificate despite the unwillingness of the members of the Bangladesh Film Censor Board, who retained this film for nearly five months at the Board office (Mohaimen 2011: n.p.).

Throughout the 1990s, however, the demand and desire for knowing true histories of the Liberation War was escalating among the general public. They were actively engaged with activities like demonstrations or participation in *gono adalot* (people's court) demanding trials of war criminals. Many critics credited *Muktir Gaan* (Song of Freedom, 1995), a documentary film, for this renewed public interest in the history of the Liberation War through its re-inscription of the history and memory of war (Van Schendel 2009: 217). *Muktir Gaan* was mostly made out of the footage shot by an American film director during the war, which Bangladeshi audiences have never seen before. In the following section, I will analyze this film closely.

In this period, another documentary film, *The War Crimes File* – directed by a foreign director Howard Bradburn uncovering the war crimes of three war criminals, who committed atrocities during the Liberation War – accelerated huge sensation and public attention. This documentary was produced by Twenty Twenty Television and broadcast on UK TV Channel 4 as part of the 'Dispatches' series in 1995. Later, it was screened in Bangladesh in various small auditoria. Using archival footage, news clippings, and survivors' interviews, this documentary highlights extensive evidence that accounted for the brutal crimes against Bengalis committed by three leaders of JI during the Liberation War.

Chowdhury Mueen Uddin, Lutfor Rahman and Abu Sayeed, the three leaders of JI, who were involved in abduction, torture, rape and mass killing of Bengalis in collaboration with the Pakistani armies and later migrated to the UK, are the subjects of *The War Crimes File*'s audio-visual investigation. Many hoped that the visual evidence of this documentary might influence the British government to instigate a prosecution under the Geneva Conventions Act 1957 for punishing those British-Bangladeshi war criminals for their crimes against humanity (Mahmood 2008: 22). Despite having requests and appeals from various organizations with sufficient evidence the British Government did not prosecute this concern. It was said by the Scotland Yard that they cannot proceed with the prosecution as the Bangladesh Government did not request any assistance from them in this regard (Hossain 2008:11). Later, however, this film provided audio-visual evidence in the International Crimes Tribunal of Bangladesh which sentenced to death Chowdhury Mueen Uddin over charges of torture, abduction and 18 murders during the war (*4 News* 3 November 2013: n.p.). I do not include this film in the list of the independent films of this period, as it is an international production. However, I mention this documentary in this section because its circulation and impact on Bangladeshi audience resembles the alternative practices and aesthetics of independent films.

Although the BNP government mostly remained silent regarding the war crimes trial, one of their initiatives in this period was estimable, particularly, in acknowledging the active role of two women in the Liberation War. In 1995, the Bangladesh government awarded two women, Tramon Bibi and Dr. Captain (Rtd.) Sitara Begaum the title of *Birprotik* for their courageous contribution in the Liberation War. Of the two *Birprotik*s, Taramon Bibi is the only one who fought directly in the frontline battle and who was, in fact, awarded this title immediately after the war in 1973. As there was no trace of her whereabouts, the government was not able to hand her the award in 1973. After a long time, in 1995, a researcher was able

to discover her existence and brought this issue to the public attention. The increasing awareness regarding the rising demand to acknowledge women's role in the war, which partly was animated in the Bangladeshis mind through the screening of *Muktir Gaan* and demands from various feminist organizations, both important factors encouraging the BNP government to honour the two women. In spite of this, many freedom fighters like Bithika Biswas, Shishir Kona, Shahana Perveen Shobha are still unknown (Murshid 2008: n.p.). Researchers, journalists and critics started to shed light on these issues of recognizing those female fighters' contribution in the war and to include them in the mainstream discourses of war.

This new wave, found among researchers, of retrieving women's role as an agent of history also began to reflect in the alternative films of this period which started with *Muktir Gaan*. In this period another film, entitled *Itihash Konnya* (Daughters of History, 1999) directed by the female director Shameem Akhtar, opens a window to see women's space in history. The film solely reveals the female narrative, and the consequences of war in their lives. By depicting the issues on war children and rape victims as unfinished issues of Bangladesh's history, this film exposes people's silence on these issues, even when they carry the traumatic war episodes relating to those issues in their personal lives. Another important aspect of this film is that it includes the perspectives of two women from Bangladesh and Pakistan regarding the Liberation War. Monika, the Bangladeshi woman and Lalarukh, the Pakistani, were childhood friends and were separated just before the war because of the departure of Lalarukh's family from Bangladesh in early March 1971 in order to avoid the horrors of the war. Both are presently involved in the research covering the issues of genocide of the war and met after a long time following the war, first, in Nairobi and then at a conference in London. Next, Lalarukh comes to Dhaka to collect data for writing a paper on the Liberation War, that aims for an apology from the Pakistan

government for its role during the war. Monika offers her different support for this purpose along with a place at their house. During Lalarukh's visit to Monika's family we slowly come to know the tragic but silent history of Monika's family who bear a haunting memory with them, that they do not share with anybody.

The eldest daughter of this house, Konika, was captured by the Pakistani army and was raped in the army camp. After the war, she returned home with a Hindu woman, Konok, who was also a victim of torture and rape by the Pakistani army. After giving birth to a daughter, Anonnya, Konika committed suicide. Anonnya is now a young woman and works as a research assistant in Monika's project, but does not know the narrative behind her birth. To the end of this film, she uncovers the whole story on how the war has left its mark on their family and on her life. Despite being shaken initially by the knowledge of her birth, she appears with more promise and dedication to the work on the oral history project of the Liberation War. Shameem Akhter in a very simple way depicts the repression of personal memories regarding the war in this film, how the idea of shame and honour structured by the society compels people to hide their personal memories, particularly the victimization of women in the war. Despite leading an oral history compilation project on the Liberation War, Monika cannot even disclose the narrative of their personal life caused by the war. Thus history is also suggested in this film as fragmented and incomplete as it cannot include many events like the episode of Monika's family. In the end, however, this film connotes Anonnya, the war child of 1971, as *Itihash Konnya* ('The Daughter of History') which is also reflected in its title. By focusing on the lives of females, their perspectives, desires and anxieties about the Liberation War, this film in my view, is the first feminist film of Bangladesh on the theme of the war. However, *Itihash Konnya* also could not avoid the normative 'exit mechanism' of rape victims and allocates a death to a *Birangona* (Konika) by her committing suicide. Akhtar's later film *Shilalipi* (The Inscription, 2002) goes beyond such

traditional solution of silencing women's experiences in the war and introduces the aesthetics of 'women's cinema' by depicting a real woman's story. I will analyze *Shilalipi* in a later point of this chapter as well as explaining the term 'women's cinema' and its implication on the film.

In spite of using the conventional 'exit mechanism' for a rape victim, *Itihash Konnya* can be regarded as a film of women's discourse in which we see perspectives of different women (Bangladeshi and Pakistani, Hindu and Muslim, old and new generation) regarding the past. However, the film could not impact the audience to a significant extent, as it was not screened as frequently as other alternative films. As a female director Shameem Akhtar was perhaps lacking that organizational link or networking potential through which alternative film directors mostly circulate and distribute their films. This film was screened in different venues in Dhaka and was also shown on the Bangladesh Television (BTV).

In contrast, during the same period two films from the independent film genre based on the Liberation War, *Ekatturer Jisu* (Jesus of 71, 1994) and *Muktir Gann* (1995) attained enormous commercial success (Ahmed 1996: 10). One of the vital reasons for this was that the distribution and exhibition of these films were carried out by the directors themselves. From 1992, BTV started to broadcast films by independent filmmakers by offering them a certain amount of honorariums (Qader 1993: 269). This opens an outlet for the independent film makers through which they started to reach a broader audience, as previously their films' screenings were predominantly within Dhaka and different cities.

Muktir Gaan (Song of Freedom, 1995) – an acoustic memory and a re-vision of history

Muktir Gaan, a feature length documentary on the Liberation War, directed by Tareque Masud and Catherine Masud, is regarded as the 'most watched documentary film in the South Asian history' and a revision of the past (Varma 1997: n.p.). This nonfiction film

subverts many clichés of war narratives, particularly in bringing the unrepresented experience of women in war discourse by depicting images and actions of real women. The Bangladeshi audience, for the first time, encounters the historical visibility of women, including their cultural and political participation in the nation's formation, in which they were as equally active as their male counterparts. Along with pre-existing newsreel and archival footage of the Liberation War from various sources, this documentary mostly incorporates the footage of 1971 shot by an American filmmaker, Lear Levin. Levin's footage was never seen before by the Bangladeshi audience and was left in the basement of his house in Manhattan for nearly 20 years, before it was traced by the Masuds in 1990 (Masud 2008: n.p.). The 20 hours 16 mm footage recorded by Levin, mostly contained the stimulating experience and journey of a cultural troupe during the war. *Bangladesh Mukti Shangrami Shilpi Shangstha* (Bangladesh Freedom Struggle Cultural Squad), a mobile singing cultural troupe which consisted of young middle-class Bengali male and female singers from different religious backgrounds, travelled through refugee camps in a truck and entered into the liberated zone crossing the border, singing inspiring nationalist songs to the refugees and freedom fighters. *Muktir Gaan* mainly reveals the journey and performances of this cultural troupe during the war in a nonfictional context. By registering the most grand belongings of Bengalis, the historical episode of the Liberation War in nonfiction moving images, this film evokes national consciousness and a thirst among the contemporary audience to reclaim their Bengali identity upon its release in 1995. The directors themselves distributed this film and screened it across Bangladesh from large cities to remote villages. Its unprecedented popularity helped this film to be regarded as the most significant film among all genres of Bangladeshi war films, hence it shapes the 'public perception of the 1971 war' most powerfully (Van Schendel 2009: 217).

Although a major portion of *Muktir Gaan* is based on Levin's footage, Tareque Masud and Catherine Masud incorporate other archival footage and some staged or re-enacted sequences shot by them. For narrating the past, this film both engages fact and fictionalization. Thus it is difficult to study this film by grouping it within the category of archival footage or a found footage film. There exist many views to distinguish the form and function of found footage film and archival footage film. Both indicate the sub-genre of new productions that use previously shot film material uncovering a reuse and revision of the past. Archival footage is preserved in the institutional form and, in contrast, found footage is collected from privately owned collections, commercial stock agencies, junk stores and even from garbage bins. Historical documentaries based on archival footage are often seen as truthful accounts of the past, however, there is debate around the objectivity of 'archive' or 'archival footage'. Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida have both argued that archive is governed by a structure of power that creates the past through a process of inclusions and exclusions, rather than simply preserving it (Foucault 2006: 28-29, and Derrida 1996:16-17). Again, documentary as a genre which is widely expected to be fact-based and requires authenticity, accuracy and authority, cannot produce the actual past. Stella Bruzzi, a documentary theorist, writes, '[d]ocumentary has always implicitly acknowledged that the "document" at its heart is open to reassessment, reappropriation and even manipulation' (Bruzzi 2000: 12). Bill Nichols's argument on the reality of documentary shows his willingness not to claim this genre as a portrayal of unbiased truth, but rather to characterize it by excess which secures ideological consent. Documentary, he argues:

is a proposition about how the world is – what exists within it, what our relations to these things are, what alternatives there might be – that invites consent. […] Documentary's reference to the world around us is not innocent. […] What it

includes and excludes, what it proposes and suppresses, remain issue of significance (1991: 140).

Thus documentary is also a cinematic construction, and a site of 'contestation and change' (Nichols 1991:12). It contains both fictional techniques and factuality, even when it incorporates archival images or found footage. Therefore, in order to analyze *Muktir Gaan*, a documentary film, mostly based on archival and found footage, my concern is not to find the level of truth or falsehood of the past depicted in this film. My effort will also not be devoted to categorizing this film as 'archival footage film' or 'found footage film'. I would rather concentrate on looking at its interpretative framework, how does this film incorporate pre-existing footage from various sources, including archive, for interpreting the past.

Figure 5.4 The musical troupe are heading towards a liberated zone in *Muktir Gaan* (1995).

Although *Muktir Gaan* is not a melodrama, nor a fiction film, it appeals to the viewers with deep emotions of nostalgia leaving them to shed a few tears. Nayanika Mookherjee attributes the popular success of this documentary to its potential of arousing 'nostalgia of a Bengali identity' (Mookherjee 2006: 72). The film was cherished by the audience as a ritual of collective remembering of the history of the Liberation War, which

has been suppressed by the institutional efforts during the military rule from 1975 to 1990. Here it is important to recall that collective memories are not a simple act of remembering, rather they are 'usable, […] determining belonging, exclusivity, solidarity and continuity' (Zelizer 1998: 4). Similarly, the Bangladeshi audience seemed to employ the cinematic memories depicted in *Mukir Gaan* as 'usable' to reconstruct their national identity in a changing socio-historical context of 1995, when Bangladesh also began to regain democracy following 15 years of autocratic rule. The audiences approved the film both as a truthful and connotative referral of the past. Naeem Mohaiemen terms these enthusiastic Bangladeshi audiences as a 'believing public' (2016: 54). He mentions that the audiences considered the film as a sacred narrative despite the fact that the film is a combination of actual, staged, fictional and recorded footage/sequences (ibid.: 54). Mohaiemen further explains audiences' lack of scepticism with *Muktir Gaan*: 'their relationship to the film was initially framed (in 1995) through joy and discovery after a long drought of visual images' of the Liberation War and, more recently, by the search for evidence and the high stakes entailed by trials for war crimes (ibid. 53). However, following the film's initial screenings, people across all generation started responding spontaneously, which the directors could not possibly ignore. The Masuds recorded their journey, the audience responses and interactions with the film while projecting it nation-wide, along with narrating their accounts and experiences of making the film. Eventually another film is born throughout this process, named *Muktir Katha* (Words of Freedom, 1999).

Despite having rare footage of 1971 which could generate a newness and a stunning opening, *Muktir Gaan* does not begin with using Levin's footage. It starts with what is arguably the most important archival footage of the history of Bangladesh, the historical speech of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, which he delivered on 7 March 1971 at the Race Course in Dhaka before millions of people. This speech, regarded as the greatest rhetoric of

Bangladesh, kindled a revolutionary zeal in Bengalis leading them to fight for their country.

The footage of the speech of Mujib is considered as one of the most significant audio-visual

documents of Bangladesh. It is alleged that throughout the fifteen-year period of military

dictatorship, from 1975 to 1990, recorded versions of the speech, whether in audio format or

audio-visual format, were deliberately excluded by the government from any kind of media

circulation.[49]

Figure 5.5 *Muktir Gaan'*s (1995) pre-title sequence with the historical speech of Sheikh Mujibur
        Rahman delivered on 7 March 1971.

Knowing that this speech depicts the historical truth, the reflection of Mujib as the

supreme figure and force of the Liberation War, the subsequent dictatorship governments

stopped its circulation. As Foucault suggests, 'if one controls people's memory, one controls

their dynamism' (Foucault 1975:28). The military governments of the mentioned period, in a

similar way, attempted to restrain the transmission of Mujib's speech to eliminate him as the

central figure of the war from the cultural memory of Bangladeshis. *Muktir Gaan*, however,

[49] Zeenat Huda in her PhD thesis states that events like the 7 March, the day of Mujib's speech
delivery in 1971, which used to carry Mujib's significance in the war, were eliminated from the
media during Zia's regime. Huda writes: 'While Zia endeavoured to invent the political mythology
against the mainstream political culture, the name of Sheikh Mujib and the significance of the
historic days including 7 March, January 10 then were ostracised from the programmes of
BTV' (Huda 2004: 158).

in its opening scene (of the pre-title sequence) includes the historical speech of Mujib as an audio-visual object of 'reprogramming' the collective memory of Bangladeshis. As 'memory provides the very core of identity' (Sturken 1997: 1), here the Masuds includes Mujib's speech to engage the audience in the act of the collective remembrance of the Liberation War and thereby in their identity construction. *Ebarer shangram amader muktir shangram, ebarer shangram Shadhinotar shangram.* ('This struggle is for our emancipation, this struggle is for our independence.') – the epic last two lines of Mujib's speech evoke a sense of melody, a melody for freedom, which reminds us that the melodious journey of *Muktir Gaan* springs from this speech. It also offers a clear reference point that the starting timeline of this documentary is 7 March 1971.

Following the speech of Mujib, a black frame appears disrupting the speech accompanied by gun fire. The next sequence appears with panic-stricken helpless people running in different directions. Mothers holding their children in their laps, an old man carrying his belongings on his head, a young boy with a confused move, a man with a cow – are all running defencelessly to save themselves from the gun fire. Slowly the running crowd turns into a procession, depicting the humanitarian crisis, the displacement of Bengalis from their motherland. Then we hear the soundtrack of different news casters reading out news over the footage of thousands of refugees, who are heading towards the border of India. The different layered news readings of different international news agencies on the crisis of East Pakistan/Bangladesh, overlapping each other, creates an ambience of authenticity to the event. The next shot cuts to more found footage where several freedom fighters are listening to a radio in their training break. The voice of Major Ziaur Rahman, the commander in chief of the Bangladesh Liberation army who later became president of Bangladesh (1976-81), emerges from the radio with the historical declaration of independence, which he delivered on 27 March 1971, from *Shadhin Bangla Betar Kendra* (Free Bengal Radio Station):

'On behalf of our great national leader, the supreme commander of Bangladesh, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, I do hereby proclaim the independence of Bangladesh'.

Just immediately after this radio announcement of Major Zia, shots appear with front line battle action between Pakistani soldiers and *Muktijodhdha*s (Bengali guerrilla fighters). Accompanying the sound of bombing and gunfire, the black and white footage reveals the attack and counter attack of the two groups. At some point, a guerrilla fighter chants the slogan *Joy Bangla* (victory to Bengal). Then the title graphics *Muktir Gaan* (Song of Freedom) in red appear on a black frame. Following the title graphic, Levin's colour footage appears and moves on revealing the journey of the musical group accompanied by different archival and re-enacted footage and scenes.

Here, at the very beginning like historians, the Masuds locate *Muktir Gaan* in the past bringing forward intriguing subjects of the historical narrative. In Bangladesh, there are still some issues regarding the declaration of independence, which remain controversial. The two leading political parties, AL (Awami League, run by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's daughter Sheikh Hasina) and BNP (Bangladesh National Party, run by Major Ziaur Rahman's widow, Begum Khaleda Zia) are at present using the declaration to support their partisan agendas by revealing different versions of its narrative. AL claims that Sheikh Mujibur Rahman declared independence on 26 March 1971 and BNP affirms that the declaration of independence solely carried out by Ziaur Rahman on 27 March 1971 omitting the part of his announcement: 'On behalf of our great national leader, the supreme commander of Bangladesh, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman'. *Muktir Gaan* presents the critical rewriting of Bangladesh's history by acknowledging Mujib as the supreme commander of Bangladesh

and also admits Zia's role as the announcer of the declaration of independence who had conveyed it on behalf of Sheikh Mujib.

Even after acknowledging the role of Zia as the announcer of the declaration of Bangladesh's independence, *Muktir Gaan* was seen by the BNP government as a 'partisan version of [AL's] history'(Mohaiemen 2011b: n.p.) since it opens with the footage of Mujib's speech and manifests many real aspects of the war that glorifies the humanist aspirations of Bengali nationalism and, to some extent, the contribution of AL in the war. Consequently, the Bangladesh Film Censor Board, controlled by the present BNP government, withheld its censorship certificate for five months. The different newspapers of Bangladesh, such as *Bhorer Kagoj*, played a vital role in creating public consciousness to demand its immediate release by featuring different articles on the film with still images. Finally, in 1995, the film obtained the screening certificate without having any instructions to cut even a single section of it (Mohaiemen 2011b: n.p.).

Figure 5.6 The musical troupe are on the truck in *Muktir Gaan* (1995).

Now, let us look at aspects of how this well-received, nonfiction narrative of the war, *Muktir Gaan,* acknowledges the contribution of women in the war by disrupting their traditionally passive, silenced and victimized over-exposed media images. As mentioned

above, *Muktir Gaan* reveals the direct experience and real journey of a cultural troupe during the war. Their travel, their leisure, their onstage performance of the moving songs in refugee and training camps, their offstage activities, such as meeting with the freedom fighters, their solace and sympathy to the refugees are revealed in this film in a unique way which supposedly offers unmediated glimpses of real events. This documentary thus creates a desire among Bangladeshi audiences both for knowledge of the past and also for an entertaining/exciting cinematic experience. Noticing this film's entertaining aspects alongside its documentary realities, Mookherjee asserts that this film possesses the romance of the road movie genre. She writes:

> The film brings out the romance of the road movie genre as young unmarried men and women of different religious and class backgrounds travel in the back of a truck huddled together in the December chill (Mookherjee 2006: 86).

I would rather say that the composition of this troupe, with a mixture of young Bengali men and women from different religions and classes, signifies its possession of a secular spirit of Bengali nationalism and a gender equal sensitivity. For many years, Bengal has a distinct and glorious cultural heritage that embraces humanist aspirations and values. It has been the home of people of different religions for centuries. A shared and syncretic identity was developed among its inhabitants beyond their individual religious identity. The traditions and values from both Muslim and Hindu religions were fused in their syncretic characteristics. The lyrics of one of the songs which the troop sing, depicts the strength of Bengali identity of the freedom fighters beyond any particular religious identification:

From Jessore, Khulna, Bagura, Pabna

Dhaka, Barisal, Nokhali they hail

Not Hindus, not Muslims, they are all Bengalis!

In a similar way, we find the reflection of Bengali identity in the formation of the singing troupe, where artists from different religions are bound together as a group holding their ethno-linguistic and secular notion of, 'Bengali' identity. This composition of the group also gives us the account of the contribution and participation of women in the war at different levels. Indeed, these songs are to inspire freedom fighters with patriotic sentiment and to motivate the heart-broken refugees. The motivation to participate in such a journey is derived from the feeling that they are also involved in a different kind of combat to liberate the country. A female member of the troupe, Shaheen, recalls herself a *shabdo shaineek* (voice soldier) while expressing her memory of the journey.[50] This non-fiction film gives the audience the reference of the reality of 1971 where women primarily appear with their self-identity as artists or as voice soldiers, disregarding the recurrent-represented gendered roles of woman in war discourses which are defined only in their familial relation to men as some one's mother, sister or wife. Although in the troupe Shaheen Mahmud is with her husband, Mahmudur Rahman Benu, the team leader of this group, her identity as a singer is more prominent and vibrant than her specification as Benu's wife. As a wife also she is not depicted as subordinate to her husband. Rather, as a partner her husband solicits for her opinion. For example, in a sequence, where the troupe members have their meal in a field nearby a canal, the day before entering into the liberated zone, Benu's discussion with Shaheen about their next show reveals the fact that they participate and share with each other regarding different issues of their performance.

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[50] With its CD publication of *Muktir Gaan*, an extra interview section is included that contains the recent interviews of the artists of the troupe; and the experiences of the directors and different technical persons involved in the film production. In this added part, we hear that Shaheen calls herself a 'voice soldier', as a member of the group, while recalling her memories of the event.

Apart from Shaheen Mahmud, we see four more female signers in the group. Two sisters, Naila Zaman and Lubna Marium; Sharmeen Morshed and Lata Chowdhury who also cross the domestic domain of home confinement and become part of the mobile singing unit. Their participation carries the evidence of women's association in the nationalist struggle. Again, their travails can be compared with the migration experience of refugees caused by the horrors of the war. Indeed, like other refugees they also have stories of loss and pain. We hear that the brother and father of two sisters, Naila Zaman and Lubna Marium, are in the battlefield, but they have no information about their present condition. Sharmeen Morshed discusses one of her friends who became paralyzed owing to his participation in the war. Within the film, at the beginning, Tarik Ali, a member of the group and the narrator of this film, proclaims the group as 'refugees' while narrating the suffering and victimization of the endless Bengali refugees pouring across the border. Mookherjee, by highlighting the group members' middle-class background, recounts them as a 'different kind of refugee' from the millions of poor Bengali refugees (85). This difference is identified by Naeem Mohaiemen, in some instances, as visible 'awkwardness'. Mohaiemen writes:

> The troupe members are, for the most part, from middle-class backgrounds. Yet, here in the course of the film, they mix with village refugees, farmers and foot soldiers. There is some awkwardness in these interactions, as when the troupe embraces a group of soldiers in a liberated zone (2011b: n.p.).

The sole identification of refugees as poor and subaltern – and thus separating the middle-class migration experience from the war-torn population – is in fact a product of processed knowledge through media circulation. Different international broadcast news agencies and individuals projected the footage of the relentless procession of poor Bengali refugees running across the border, forming a spectacle of suffering during the war and in the

subsequent years. Thus, this footage of the refugees became iconic, synonymous with the Liberation War, and restricting the memory of the war to this recurrent theme. The musical group's refugee experience, however, is a combination of forced and voluntary migration. The former is created as they are displaced from their home by their crossings of the border to seek refuge and the latter is evident in their musical journey. Unlike other refugees, they have agency. Their agency clearly exists by their effort to support and boost the morale of the refugees and the freedom fighters' through their singing in various musical performances.

The songs of *Muktir Gaan* are the most authoritative soundtrack of this film and which have a gender neutral tone, as most of them are sung by both male and female members of the troupe in chorus. This choric sound track of songs does not belong to a particular male or a female voice. Rather, it is collaborative, denoting a mutual but sex neutral tone. This is the first historical documentary of Bangladesh which gives dynamic power to women, similar to their male peers, by bringing their voice into the public sphere and assigning a linguistic authority to them. Regardless of their gender, both male and female members of the troupe appear in this film as 'voice soldiers', which does not have any gender specific connotation. In the second chapter of this thesis, I have already discussed how *Stop Genocide,* a wartime documentary, has kept women silenced following the nationalist ideology of Bangladesh which mostly defines and depicts women as insufficient and victims in the discourse of the war.

Female voice has long been neglected in the audiovisual media, not only in Bangladesh, but also in the Western world. Kaja Silverman contends how soundtrack in the classic Western cinematic narrative constructs sexual difference. She writes:

> Classical cinema projects [the] differences at the formal as well as the thematic level. Not only does the male subject occupy positions of authority within the diegesis, but occasionally he also speaks extra-diegetically, […]. The female subject, on the contrary, is excluded from positions of discursive authority both inside and outside the diegesis (1984: 132).

In Western narrative the female voice is not completely silenced. She is heard crying, screaming or murmuring sweetly. These patterns of voice are insistently held with the rule of synchronization which marries the female voice with her bodily spectacle. She has little or no linguistic authority in the narrative. Her voice is rather linked with 'unreliable, thwarted and acquiescent speech' (ibid.: 131). *Muktir Gaan*, however, going beyond the classic convention, assigns women with linguistic authority by depicting them as 'voice soldiers'. This film also disregards the rule of synchronization of classic narrative that solely matches female voice with her bodily appearance, as this film predominantly includes the original soundtrack of Levin's footage. Although most of the songs are diegetic, and thus being presented as part of the performance of the troupe, in some cases they have been re-recorded and have even included alterations to the original lyrics and tunes. However, in case of synchronization this alteration does not break the illusion of documentary reality, as the visuals do not focus on a particular male or female appearance. Whether it is chorus or solo singing, the visuals include images of both male and female singers and the reaction of the audience, rendering their performance as a collective and reciprocal act. Thus, the roles of both male and female members of the group in the production of the discourse or story telling are equally powerful.

Again, it may be argued that the voice-over narration of *Muktir Gaan,* which also constitutes a significant part of the soundtrack of this film, read by Tarik Ali, a male member of the troupe, represents the power of male subjectivity. In Bangladesh most of the

documentary productions usually employ a male non-visible narrator's voice, separate from the location or scene/s of the film. These types of voice-over narration belong to the non-diegetic sounds. The quality of the voice-over of this genre is exceptionally audible with a bold and strong male vocalization, which usually designates a power to that unseen narrator over the discourse of the documentary. Silverman argues that the superior knowledge of such disembodied masculine voice-over in Western documentaries, police thrillers and prison dramas, even with its diegetic detachment, usually aligns the narrator with the authority or the law of the symbolic father (1988: 163). The disembodied masculine voice-over in documentaries, both in the Eastern and Western world, is almost an institution that solicits our interest and belief in the supremacy of such bold quality of male voice-over denoting his subjectivity. *Muktir Gaan*, to some extent, follows this norm, as it also includes male voice-over narration. The voice-over of Tarik Ali, however, is an embodied voice-over which comes from within the narrative and breaks the cultural dimension of a conventional voice-over narration that projects masculine boldness, as Ali's voice is low-pitched with a faint huskiness. Moreover, on several occasions during the film, he has been characterized, at least bodily, as a weak man, which associates him, to some extent, with feminine connotations. For example, in a scene when Ali is shown as being interviewed by Major Gias for a possible inclusion in the *Mukti Bahini*, he is refused because of his power glasses (spectacles). Here his physical disabilities appear as masculine flaws or deficiencies that ultimately classify him as 'other', who is worthy of singing rebellious songs but is not allowed to participate in the rebel action.

It is important to point out that this scene of the interview is a staged and rehearsed one (Marium n.d.: n.p.). This scene is in fact a reflection of the idea of American masculinity in war discourses shot by an American cinematographer, Lear Levin. Over the last century, America has participated in many wars, selectively recruiting for its armed forces through

process of scanning for potencies presumed to be masculine. Hollywood has frequently projected the concept of American masculinity in war discourses as 'spectacular body', alluding to a mythical association between the bodily strength of American soldiers and the nation's strength (Khatib 2006: 64). In contrast, the Liberation War of Bangladesh was a peoples' war where people participated from all walks of life. Nobody was ever interviewed to be recruited in the *Mukti Bahini*. As *Mukti Bahini*s were not paid soldiers, the question of their physical disabilities was not an issue or obstacle for their participation on the war front. There are many examples, one of which is cited by Lubna Marium, a female member of the group, as she says, 'Shahadat Chowdhury, present editor of *Bichitra* [a renowned magazine of Bangladesh], who fought as one of [the] valiant freedom fighters in spite of a genetic disorder in one eye' (Marium 2009: n.p.). By recalling the scene of the interview of Tariq Ali with Major Gias as a rehearsed one, she raises the questions of authenticity of historical discourses and says explicitly that, 'we cannot escape from the fact that it [*Muktir Gaan*] is not the whole truth' (2009: n.p.). Nevertheless, to the end, she mentions *Muktir Gaan* as a 'piece of art', easing the argument about historical reality and transparency of this film. The point I would like to make here, is that in spite of Tarik Ali's representation as 'other' which is associated with his soft bodily and vocal appearances, the Masuds places his voice at the center of this documentary in narrating and exposing the events. His voice-over narration represents in fact the point of view of the cultural troupe and provides the narrative frame of this musical journey, challenging the dominant concept of masculinized voice-over that predominantly constructs a hard bodily appearance of the unseen narrator in our mind.

On many occasions, *Muktir Gaan* thus challenges the dominant knowledge and ideology of our society. It particularly reconstitutes women as subjects of history, knowledge, actions and discourses, disrupting conventional gender norms. Women in war discourses are commonly represented as passive and suffering figures whose thoughts and

actions mostly revolve around the private domestic sphere or their personal gain. They do not posses any political awareness or nationalist concerns. In *Muktir Gaan* we see different images of women that suggest their place and involvement in history, both physically and intellectually. In a sequence, when the group stop for a while as the truck breaks down, we see that the male and female members are involved in different types of activities that oppose their traditional gender norms or cultural codes. Two male vocalists, Benu and Bipul Bhattacharya, are practising Ragas, while female members are reading English newspapers and sharing news on the ravages of war and war fronts with each other. We see that the headline – 'Free Bangladesh by December?' – appears in the back side of a newspaper read by Naila Zaman (Figure 5.7). Indeed, at the time of her reading the newspaper, it was a questionable projection of hope on whether Bangladesh's independence was possible by December. But when the film was first released before the audience in 1995, by that moment it became a historical truth that Bangladesh won its independence on 16 December 1971. Thus the framing of Naila Zaman with the newspaper headline displays her as a history narrator who reveals the viewpoint of the press and media on the Liberation War. We then see Naila and Sharmeen share different news on war ravage with each other, revealing the death of civilians in several regional districts. They then point out an article on Pakistani Army, entitled, 'We are tired – we want wine and women'. Here again, women reveal another historical truth about how the paid soldiers of West Pakistan fought the war and their impulses behind it. In another sequence, when the troupe is being treated to dinner in a refugee family after their musical performance, we hear a very crucial question from Naila Zaman, addressed to the head of the refugee family: 'Have you planted crops in your field? As you left home what will happen to the crops?' While male members, like Swapan Chowdhury, are playing clownishly with children and others; like Tarik Ali, are busy querying a member of the family about a parrot; that moment Naila's question stands for

production, a concern that is usually representative of the male sphere. Thus with the inclusion of direct expression of real historical women *Muktir Gaan* celebrates a modern depiction of Bengali women on many occasions, something which was previously mostly unarticulated.

Figure 5.7 Naila Zaman reading the newspaper in *Muktir Gaan* (1995)

Even after capturing the images and actions of real women, the stereotypes of women do not vanish completely from this film, which are common features of war discourses. Most of the songs' lyrics glorify the strength and spirit of *Mukti Bahini*s depicting them as the brave sons of *Banga Jononi* (mother Bengal), who are assigned to steering the nation's wheel. Whenever some songs hail the courageous contribution of the real historical and heroic figures of Bengal, they only articulate the names of all male heroes like Shurjo Sen, Titumir, Hossain Shah and others who fought valiantly during different revolutionary movements of Bengal against British domination. Here is the example of one such song of *Muktir Gaan* which is utterly adorned with the heroic deeds of historical male figures:

> We are the irresistible young sons of Bengal mother
>
> who are restless, tireless and determined to keep promise.
>
> The valiant glory of Surja Sen and Titumir,
>
> the striking rhythm of Lalon Shah and Nazrul,
>
> the great vigour of Hossain Shah and Isha Khan
>
> are the sources to enliven our soul […]

In such songs, however, no female revolutionaries are mentioned, in spite of the fact that Bengali women played a significant role in the various phases of freedom struggle. Among such female revolutionaries Preetilata Waddadar, Sarla Devi Chowdhurani, Halima Khatun, Razia Khatun, Bina Das, Kalyani Das and Lila Nag's name are referable who led some important campaigns in the freedom struggle of this land against the British Raj (Mandal 1991: 27, 28). It needs to be mentioned here that Preetilata Waddadar was the first woman of Bangladesh who died in revolutionary action in Chittagong in 1932. The female exclusion from the list of valiant historical figures in the songs' lyrics of this film, however, denotes cultural practices of Bangladesh, inclined to locate female outside history. Although some songs of *Muktir Gaan* valorize the female acceptance as a mother's body, they also serve to evoke national solidarity and to stimulate aspiration among the offspring of Bengal to free the 'mother-nation' from the invasion of West Pakistan. In this context, the offspring of the mother Bengal paradoxically represent the *Mukti Bahini*s who are male, even after the songs are sung by both male and female offspring of the mother Bengal. Moreover, the scenes of this documentary depicting training camps or battles, do not include the images with the presence of a single woman. It somehow indicates *Muktir Gaan*'s approval of labelling the nationalist struggle as masculine, despite its depiction of various repressed aspects of women in the Liberation War. Noticing this limitation of *Muktir Gaan* on documenting women's role in the real battle action, the Masuds, subsequently make another documentary, entitled *Narir*

Kotha (Women and War, 2000), which is entirely focused on women warriors and rape victims in the Liberation War. However, *Narir Kotha* does not attain the same level of audience acceptance like *Muktir Gaan*.

Like the opening, *Muktir Gaan* ends on an identifiable historical date. While the first sequence indicates its starting time frame as the 7 March 1971 with the documentation of Mujib's speech, the closing sequence marks the independence day of Bangladesh, which is 16 December 1971, by capturing visuals of peoples' victory celebration on the road and the return of *Mukti Bahini*s and the members of the musical troupe. This last sequence is in fact a made sequence, done on the editing panel. It was finalized using archival footage from the 16 December 1971 and Levin's footage. Here different shots of people's victory celebration were matched and intercut to the different shots of the performers depicting their joyful reaction from the truck. The justification of such combination of visuals is to give an idea that the group return to Dhaka on the 16 December 1971, which is also when, in accordance with the independence of Bangladesh, the troops' physical journey ends. The journey towards achieving the ultimate freedom of Bangladesh, however, is indicated as ongoing by the music which accompanies the end credit: *Amader shongram cholbey ei cholbey, jonotar shongram cholbey* (Our struggle will go on, the struggle of masses will go on).

Even with some limitations and editorial manipulation of pre-existing footage, *Muktir Gaan* is assumed by Bangladeshis to be an objective recording of the Liberation War. It mostly uncovers the real journey of the musical troupe. We cannot, however, deny the fact that the performers were aware about the camera's presence, which to some extent altered their natural expression. Moreover, many offstage sequences were pre-rehearsed before they were shot by Levin. At the time of editing, the Masuds include extensive archival and reenacted footage with the footage recorded by Levin to enhance sometimes the rhythm and meaning of the songs, and sometimes to broadly form the narrative of the 9 months-long

Liberation War. Thus blurring the generic boundaries of documentary and fiction film, *Muktir Gaan* depicts the past in a semi-narrative way, representing it as an audio-visual collage of alternative history. The concerns among the audience or critics to investigate the level of truth or representation of history in it were disregarded. The film's significance evolves from its ability both to denote and depict the real event of the Liberation War. During the 1990s, while the memory of the Liberation War was almost waning, this film's significant role in creating a critical-emotional perception of the history of the Liberation War allows it to be regarded as a film dedicated to rescuing and re-visioning history. Likewise, the female images of *Muktir Gaan,* depicting the direct and unarticulated expression of real women of history, are also redemptive. This is the first film in the cinematic history of Bangladesh which documents the different contributions of women in the nationalist struggle in a performative and creative way. *Muktir Gaan*, however, incites further aspiration to explore the role of women in frontline battle actions, which it fails to include.

Contemporary independent war films (2000 - 2011)

During this period the socio-economic conditions of Bangladesh went through many changes and transitions due to the effect of globalization. This was mainly intensified by the power and influence of the markets. At the same time, the rise of different media and online networks accelerated a shift in the media landscape. This also shook up the thinking and work of alternative filmmakers. Previously, in order to screen their films, focusing on the Liberation War, on the state-owned BTV, alternative filmmakers had to follow the many commands of the existing government. During this period, with the launch of private TV channels, they found alternative outlets through which to display their work, offering considerable freedom. These newly launched TV channels, which are mainly commercially

driven and dependent on corporate money, undertook a new strategy to brand nationalism on their screens. They started financing Liberation War-themed films, with the aim of premiering them both in mainstream theaters and on their television channels. A few well-known first generation alternative filmmakers took this opportunity to make films using corporate funding and entered the mainstream industry. In Chapter Three, I have already discussed some of these productions.

At the beginning of this era, the theme of the Liberation War, and the different contributions of women during the war, received much attention in different media. The political context of the time also favors such themes. The political context of the time also favors such theme. After nearly 25 years, in 1996, the AL formed a government under the leadership of Sheikh Hasina, the eldest daughter of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, who is hailed by many Bangladeshis as the supreme leader of the Liberation War and independent Bangladesh. During Hasina's regime, from 1996 to 2001, the inauguration of different media, particularly the formation of Ekushey Television (ETV), the first private and terrestrial television channel in Bangladesh, created a new wave in the media industry by introducing dynamic news presentations and entertaining programs. ETV also promoted the war-themed shows and films through their frequent broadcasts. For example, *Ami Birangona Bolchi* [I, the war-heroine, speaking] a serial program covering the previously untold stories of seven *Birangona*s, broadcast on ETV in 2000, attained huge public attention. This show was a reading of the book of the same name, published in 1998 and edited by Nilima Ibrahim. At the same time, research and important publications prompted significant recordings of women's experiences of the war during this period. *Narir 71 o Juddho Poroborti Kottho Kahini* [Oral History Accounts of Women's 1971 and Post-war] (2001) is a significant research publication of this period conducted by Ain o Salish Kendro (ASK). It contains first-person accounts of gendered violence suffered by 19 Bangladeshi women

during the war. Hamida Hossain had overseen this project with the involvement of researchers, all of whom were female.

In the alternative film domain, it was also the women filmmakers who initiated the restoration of the female voice in films. Catherine Masud, with her husband Tareque Masud, made *Women and War* in 2000, in which they documented the testimonies of several *Birangona*s, including one from an *adibashi* (aboriginal) woman. In this film, the *Birangona*s narrated their traumatic experiences during the war and also shared some of society's post-war reactions to them. The ASK was the producer of the film which also published *Narir 71 o Juddho Poroborti Kottho Kahini,* a publication, that I mentioned above, registered women's memories of the war with critical insight.

In 2002, Shameem Akhtar made *Shilalipi* (The Inscription) which fictionalized the life of Selina Parveen, the only woman to be recorded on the list of *Shaheed Buddhijibi* (the Martyred Intellectuals) in the war of 1971. In the following section, I will analyze this film closely.[51] In the discussion, my aim will be to explore its feminist film aesthetic, which inspires and guides the female filmmaker, Shameem Akhtar, in her effort to establish a woman's footprint in history.

Shadhinota (A Certain Liberation, 2003), a documentary film by another female filmmaker, Yasmine Kabir, depicts the true story of a *Birangona,* Gurudasi Mondol. Identifying herself as a mad, Mondol wanders the streets of Kopilmoni, a small town in rural Bangladesh. This could be interpreted as a survival strategy on Mondol's part, as she seeks to escape within herself from her haunting memories of the war. Members of her family were

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[51] Towards the end of the Liberation War, when the Pakistan army realized that their defeat in the war was certain, they launched systematical killings of Bengali intellectuals in order to impoverish the nation. Between 12 and 14 December in 1971, with the help of local collaborators, they killed the finest offspring of East Pakistan, including many eminent Professors, journalists, writers, physicians, scientists, lawyers, artists, philosophers and political thinkers. In memory of these *Shaheed Buddhijibi* (the Martyred Intellectuals) in the war, 14 December is commemorated as Martyred Intellectuals Day in Bangladesh.

killed before her eyes. Later on in the war, she was imprisoned, raped and tortured by collaborators and the occupying forces. This film conveys how the trauma of gendered violence induced by the war is unforgettable for a survivor-woman even 30 years after the event. These memories have been excluded from the historical record in many instances. Moreover, societal attitudes towards Mondol as a *Birangona* escalated her mental disorder in the post-war period. The film received several awards in different film festivals, including the Golden Conch for Best Documentary in the Mumbai International Film festival, India, 2004 and the Jury Award, Documenta Madrid, 2004.

Matir Moina (The Clay Bird, 2002) directed by Tareque Masud is the most significant film of this era, as this is the first film of Bangladesh to compete the Cannes Film Festival. Its success in winning the International Critics' (FIPRESCI) award drew international attention. *Matir Moina* received a grant from the French Government under the South Fund and secured support from renowned French distributor MK2 in its international distribution phase. The film covers the socio-political condition of East Pakistan in the late 1960s and its progress towards the climactic moment in history, the Liberation War in 1971. The Liberation War, however, appears as a secondary element in its content, which largely pays attention to the clashes and contradictions of two identities of Bengalis, the secular notion of Bengali identity versus Muslim identity. These two streams are revealed within a family, through two brothers Kazi and Milon. Kazi is the representative of Muslim Bengali identity and appears as an orthodox Muslim; and his younger brother Milon, who is a Marxist, bears the notion of secular Bengali identity.

After finding out that his twelve-year-old son Anu goes to different Hindu festivals and rites with Milon, Kazi sends Anu to *madrasha*, which he believes will shape him as a perfect Muslim, despite the unwillingness of the boy and his mother, Ayesha.[52] Due to Kazi's

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[52] *Madrasha* is a religious education institution for Muslim children.

dogmatic practices and views, his daughter Asma dies following a fever. Kazi does not allow her to take allopathic medicine, considering it as a product of the Western countries. In *madrasha*, we see a different world through Anu's eyes which invites a certain remoteness and backwardness in the audience both within Bangladesh and abroad. There, Anu's friendship with Rokon, who is different from other boys, and the episode of Rokon's own imaginative hidden world where he frees himself from the restricted routine of *madrasha* life are depicted powerfully in this films. It also forms a childhood nostalgia. Many contend that this is an autobiographical film by Tareque Masud, who also had to go to *madrasha* for education like Anu (Raju 2011: n.p.). However, in my view, this film is an ideologically driven film which seeks to redefine the national identity of Bangladeshis as Bengali. In the end, it depicts the collapse of Kazi's faith in Muslim brotherhood. While everybody leaves their home for a secure place knowing that the Pakistani armed forces are entering the village, Kazi stays at home with his steadfast confidence in Muslim brotherhood. He thinks that the Muslim Pakistani soldiers will not do him any harm. The films ends with revealing the destruction of Kazi's house by the Pakistani army as well as his faith. Finally, Ayesha and Anu leave broken Kazi in the almost damaged house caused by Kazi's Muslim brothers, the Pakistani army.

For intensifying the spirit of Bengaliness, this film includes different rural festivals and a number of folk forms of performances, such as *Puthi Path* (ballad on Karbala), *Kobir Lorai* (debate songs by Baul), *Pala Gaan*. This re-appropriation of different cultural forms serves both the desire of the Western gaze for others' culture and the demand of a local educated audiences for their disappearing cultural traditions that evoke in them a sense of ethnic nostalgia. Again, it needs to be noted that all the performances staged in this film are with some inner thoughts and moral lessons conveying the director's motivation for establishing the spirit of Bengali identity or the beauty of the moderate form of Islam.

Despite its all liberal visions, *Matir Moina* reiterates the muteness of women in the cinematic discourse of the Liberation War. Although in the last scene, we see Aysha is leaving her husband, Kazi, which illustrates a rebellious step on her part, however, she is not heading towards the battlefield. She does not have any concern or interest in the war. At this point, it should be noted that except for Milon and his friends, we do not see any involvement of the villagers in the war. They only escape when the army attacks. The event of the Liberation War thus becomes a narrative element of this film rather than appearing with its historical vastness. The war seems to be brought in this film to contribute to the shifting of Kazi's motivation and reliance on Muslim brotherhood. Initially, the Bangladesh Film Censor Board banned this film in May 2002 (Raju 2015: 190). The ban took place during a period when Bangladesh was governed by the BNP in an alliance with JI. The Film Censor Board highlighted the film's 'religiously sensitive material' for the ban (Mohaiemen cited in Chaudhuri 2005: 153). Later, *Matir Moina*'s international success led the officials of the Film Censor Board to withdraw the ban.

In 2008, Tanvir Mokammel made *Rabyea* (The Sister) focusing on the story of a brave sister, Rabeya, who died for securing the burial of the dead body of her freedom fighter brother. Her brother's burial is announced as forbidden by the *razakars*. In the film's plot, we see the relocation of Sophocles's play Antigone. The film connotes Rabeya's sacrifice as courageous as that of a freedom fighter, however, in her portrayals we see a reconstruction of the Greek myth by a male director rather than a depiction of the real experiences of women during the war. There also arises a natural question about the legitimacy of Rabeya's situation: in the gruesome conditions of war, would a brother's burial be such a concern for a sister, disregarding the broader needs of the country? In the end, however, the film, acknowledges Rabeya's death as the death of a martyr, as we see the villagers carry the dead bodies of both Rabeya and her freedom fighter brother for burial.

In 2011, Tanvir Mokammel returned to the theme of the Liberation War by making a four-hour long documentary, *1971*. This film tried to narrate almost every aspect of the war by including interviews with 176 people and much archive footage of the Liberation War, collected from Europe and the USA (*Daily Star* 2012: n.p.). This film also contains accounts by *Birangona*s. For example, Ferdousi Priyobhashini, an eminent sculptor and *Birangona*, states her wartime experiences in it. However, due to the film's epic length and the volume of issues to do with the war covered within it, the women's accounts of their war experiences do not create an intense impact.

In recent years, young independent film directors are not focusing on the theme of the Liberation War as the main content of their films (Haq 2009: 83). Unlike the first generation of alternative filmmakers, the newly emerged independent film directors are not interested in the construction or depiction of identity issues. They are eager to explore new themes, exploring inner and intense feelings. By breaking the narrative flow and structure of traditional cinema, these new generation alternative filmmakers endeavor to experiment with the language of cinema.

Shilalipi and the de-aestheticization of 'woman': the making of a Bangladeshi women's cinema

Teresa de Lauretis perceives 'Woman' as a 'fictional construct' created by dominant Western cultural discourses while referring to 'women' as historically located real individuals (de Lauretis 1984, 5). Agreeing with de Lauretis's observation about 'Woman' and 'women', I would say that Bangladeshi war films predominantly represent female characters in the form of 'Woman', a mythical construction of patriarchy. *Shilalipi* (The Inscription, 2002), however, is the first war-themed film of Bangladesh to depict the reality of 'women' by portraying the narrative of a real historical woman. Its subject is *Shaheed* (Martyr) Selina

Parveen, a writer and editor of a magazine called *Shilalipi* (The Inscription), who was killed by the Pakistani forces during the Liberation War. Parveen is the only female martyr of Bangladesh to be recorded on the list of *Shaheed Buddhijibi* (the Martyred Intellectuals) in 1971. Shameem Akthar, the director of *Shilalipi*, who is also a woman, fictionalizes the life of Selina Parveen in this film. By focusing on Perveen's real life struggle, desire and dreams, Akhtar traces the lost narrative of Parveen's life and acknowledges her contribution during the war, thus depicting her as a martyr. I will argue that this film is the first women's cinema of Bangladesh which seeks to retrieve women's footprint and agency in history, challenging the ideological codes of society. This film also endeavors to question many ideological effects of the dominant cinema production, and creates a feminist reading of history. Moreover, it avoids some tactics frequently evident in the independent films of Bangladesh.

Since I claim that *Shilalipi* is the first women's cinema of Bangladesh focusing on the theme of the Liberation War, before providing the accounts supporting my claim, I would like to present some key concepts relating to the definition of 'women's cinema'. Although feminist scholars admit that 'women's cinema' is a difficult concept to define, they review this cinema as a cinema made by women, for women, dealing with women's desire and concerns (Butler 2002: 01; Mayne 1984: 49-50). Women's cinema, de Lauretis writes, 'defines all points of identification (with character, image, camera) as female, feminine, or feminist' (1994b: 146). Elsewhere she writes upon dismantling the visual pleasure of classic narrative cinema, it should address the viewer *as* woman (1984). Finally, she considers women's cinema to be 'a new language of desire' which comprises 'the de-aestheticization of the female body, the desexualization of violence, de-oedipalization of narrative' (1994b.: 158).

Figure 5.8 *Shaheed Buddhijibi* Selina Parveen (1931-1971).

Judith Mayne defines women's cinema as the ' "re-vision" of the institution of the cinema' (1990: 2) which attempts to disengage 'the voyeuristic look' of narrative cinema, denying its normative construction of 'woman as spectacle' (1984: 55). There is another term, namely 'woman's film', which also deals with female issues, but places 'voyeurism and fetishism [as] central to [its] cinematic pleasure in the first place' (Mayne 1990: 3). The melodrama productions of Hollywood, which were especially popular throughout the 1930s, '40s and '50s, are also considered to be part of this genre. Despite focusing on the female point of view and their experiences, these films eventually present female desire as unfulfilled. In the end, women are portrayed as surrendering to the patriarchal values of society.

By contrast, women's cinema challenges 'some of the most basic and fundamental links between cinema and patriarchy' (Mayne 1990: 1-2). While a 'woman's film' refers to the conventional Hollywood production, 'women's cinema' denotes those films made by women directors, that focus on the desire and identities of real women, rather than

showcasing the illusory nature of desire and cinematic pleasure. It is worth recalling Alison

Butler regarding her perception of women's cinema:

> [Women's cinema] is neither a genre nor a movement in film history, it has no single lineage of its own, no national boundaries, no filmic or aesthetic specificity, but traverses and negotiates cinematic and cultural traditions and critical and political debates (2002: 1).

Butler also mentions that women's filmmaking should not be based solely on creating an understanding of gendered subjectivity, but also on scrutinizing women's position in contemporary culture (ibid.: 22). Given the multifaceted dimensions of women's cinema mentioned above, my analysis of *Shilalipi* will also engage in a critical reading of 'women', the real historical characters, within their socio-cultural, political and historical context. Taking into account female subjectivity and the desire of a real woman, I aim to explore how this film constitutes female authorship and a feminist intervention in the cinematic culture of Bangladesh. I will also outline its different aesthetic impulse and impression to the practices of woman's film.

Shilalipi begins with a 'piece to camera' (PTC) of Choudhury Shumon Zahid, the son of Selina Parveen, who recalls the day when his mother was picked up by collaborators with the Pakistani forces. We hear his accounts of his childhood memories; how his mother was captured by collaborators, and when his mother's decomposed corpse was found at Rayer Bazaar brick field, on 17 December 1971, among the dead bodies of many martyrs.[53] Shumon Zahid then, clearly states his expectation of this film, made after 30 years of his

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[53] At Rayer Bazaar brick field, the Pakistani army with the help of their collaborators killed many Bangladeshis including a great number of the eminent intellectuals of Bangladesh nearing the end of the Liberation War. Later, to commemorate the death of the intellectuals, a memorial was built there, named, *Badhya Bhumi Smriti Soudha* (Slaughter-place Memorial).

mother's death, is not to find the factual resemblances or differences to his mother's life. He rather believes that Selina Parveen is not only his (own) mother, but that her relationship to the nation as a martyr, is more profound. Then the title roles over the visuals of an old building focusing on its different parts: an arch, pillars, windows, passages from different angles. The accompanying music of the Behala, over the broken and fading texture and structure of the two-storey edifice, creates a mood of nostalgia, preparing spectators for the viewing of a historical past. It also indicates that the context of this narrative is old Dhaka.

After the title credit, the first frame catches a slogan on a poster for a photographic exhibition: 'The War We Forgot'. Then the viewers are exposed to the exhibition hall displaying photographs of the Liberation War of 1971. As '[n]o object is more equated with memory than the camera image, in particular the photograph' (Sturken 1997: 19), in the opening sequence, Akhtar displays still images of 1971 as a material of evidence to transport viewers to the past. The shocking images bearing witness to the atrocities that occurred in 1971 jolt the audience's memory into retrieving past events. These images also cue to the personal memories of Suborno (the cinematic version of Selina Parveen's son, Shumon,), driving his imagination back to his childhood. We then see a shift in temporal and spatial reality. With a sound of a traditional toy a flashback starts, leaving behind the exhibition hall. Suborno appears as a boy of eight years and enters that two-storey edifice, the old building, we saw in the opening title. Then we see his mother, Nasreen (the fictional characterization of Selina Parveen) telling him the very two words *Ghorey Jao* (go inside) she used while she was taken away from her house by force by the collaborators.

Once more, another shift to the present time through a dissolved transition into a photograph of the exhibition, displaying a decomposing female face separated from its body in the brick field (Figure 5.9). This female face bears witness to the tragic end of a woman like Parveen's life in the war and triggers the audience's memories of the past. Suborno then

enters the past once more. As an eight-year-old child, he walks joyfully onto the veranda of the old building, to see a plane flying in the sky. He returns to the hall, in the present time as he hears his fiancé, Samina, calling his name: 'Suborno!'.

Figure 5.9 A photograph, displayed in the exhibition, triggers Suborno's memory of the tragic end of his mother's life by the Pakistani army in *Shilalipi* (2002).

The whole narrative of the film is then presented from the perspective of Suborno, who recalls memories of his mother through flashbacks and storytelling. Samina inspires Suborno to publish an anthology containing different people's opinions and memoirs of his mother. In order to collect several articles and enough evidence, they go to various people who were in close contact with Nasreen. During their journey to collect testimonies about her, they arrive at the house of a famous contemporary painter, Mr. Reza, one of her very close friends. We hear Reza's personal memories of Nasreen, although he requires Suborno's help to configure some of his recollection. The film eventually appears to be structured as Suborno's journey towards past and present in order to establish his mother's role in history. It thus symbolizes a denial of the society's prescribed normative identification relating to the Name-of-the-Father.

A series of flashbacks in this film is used to represent and recreate the strength and struggle of a mother, who after being separated from her husband, takes different jobs and strives to build a decent life for herself and her eight-year-old son, Suborno. She is also a journalist who writes provocative pieces against the domination of West Pakistani authorities and publishes a magazine with the savings from her own limited earnings. She is not only characterized by progressive thought and values, but is also a patron and supporter of the *Muktijodhdha*s, a martyr and overall an agent of history. Her real existence and experiences are mainly introduced through Suborno's subjective memories, using the flashback technique. Although flashback represents the personalized cinematic memory of an individual, it also bears ideological and nationalistic implications. Susan Hayward argues, '[flashbacks] represent an evaluation of a life, but through a subjective framing of history, they tend to mythologize the "great man" ' (2000a, 135). In *Shilalipi*, the dominant connotation of flashbacks is interrupted, and discourses of nationalism and ideology are rewritten. This film uncovers the narrative of a woman's life as the subject of discourse and history, instead of portraying the 'great man'.

In general, the representation of Bangladeshi women in film, in the context of the Liberation War, repeatedly stereotypes them as helpless victims and passive sufferers. Should some subjectivities of women be occasionally portrayed in films, that would still construct them with secondary or subordinate roles as opposed to men. However, the nationalist discourse of Bangladesh, in the context of the Liberation War, has given an enormous emphasis on woman by describing her as the 'mother-nation' (Mookherjee 2003: 170-171), who appears mainly as a silent and passive victim. Her invasion by the Pakistani army seems to be structured in the war discourses as the source of evoking a strong feeling in her sons, who fought bravely to protect her and to saver her chastity from the violation of

the occupying forces. This male-driven narrative of nationalist discourse is also evident in Bangladeshi war films.

In *Shilalipi*, we see a counter narrative – the mother dies for the country's freedom, for securing a land for her son to inhabit. The question of whether she had been raped after her detention by the collaborators is disregarded. She appears as a notion of pride by becoming a part of history, whereas women have been predominantly excluded from both film and historical discourse after being violated by the enemy. The remaining woman in the dominant discourse of nationalism is a pure but passive mother who is protected by her brave sons. In contrast, Suborno is not portrayed as a brave son, having no similarities with the traditional sons found in war films. He was not able to protect his mother. Both as a child and an adult, Suborno depends on his mother's physical or spiritual presence. In his adult life, a sense of loss and fatigue are apparent in him, something which derives from the absence of his mother. This is why he is shown to be repeatedly transported to the past through flashbacks, in search of the unattainable presence of his mother.

Conversely, the absence of a father in Suborno's life since his childhood, due to the divorce of his parents, did not create any emptiness in him. From his recollection with Reza, we learn that after his mother's death his father came to take him, but he did not meet him. He was eventually brought up without the protection or affection of a father. His mother's appearance remains vibrant in his memory, both in the role of mother and father. The dominant ideological investment in the notion of the paternal family, which requires us to believe in the supremacy of a father, is being challenged in this film. The traditional conception of a family in Bangladesh identifies a series of oppositions between father and mother, focusing on power versus passivity, public versus private, outer versus inner. The domestic role that is allocated to a mother in a family has been re-positioned in *Shilalipi*.

Nasreen inhabits both the domains of home and the world, and plays an active role in the formation of the nation.

In terms of space, Suborno's memories are mostly bound up with the old house. It resides in his sense with a notion of tangibility. Akhtar skilfully portrays Suborno's memory of the house. She reflects the sensory textures of the place in Suborno's memories through visualization of sight, sound and smell. This cinematic technique of mirroring sensory memories triggers our senses to engage ourselves with Suborno's mental impressions, although we have not experienced them directly ourselves. Meghna Guhathakurta also notices the depiction of such sensory textures of the house in this film. In her review of the film, she writes, 'The gaunt graying stones of the massive house are filled with the sights, sounds and smells of warmth, comfort and good cheer'(2002: 54).

The house belongs to Mr Asad, who was once actively involved in the Communist Party. He now devotes his time to writing after leaving behind all his political party affiliations. He has given shelter to Nasreen and Suborno. Nasreen cares for Mr Asad like a father, which, in turn, inspires great affection in him for both Nasreen and Suborno. Families from different religious backgrounds live in the house, occupying two to three rooms per family. Besides Nasreen and Suborno, the other tenant families who reside in this house are two Hindu couples, Mr Amal and his wife, his brother Alok and brother's wife Deepa; and a Muslim man, Shahadat, who migrated from India during the riots of 1964. Mr Amal has two daughters with whom Suborno practises singing, plays, fights, and shares his joys and experiences of different events. Suborno addresses Mr Amal's wife as *Masima* (Aunt). She takes good care of Suborno and feels deep affection for him. Deepa *Masi* (Aunt), the wife of Alok, teaches him and also takes him to the movies when the couple enjoy their weekend break together. While Nasreen is outside the house, due to her job and other commitments relating to her magazine publication, Suborno is well looked after by Mr Asad and the other

inhabitants of the house. The collection of families from different religious backgrounds under the same roof evokes the secular notion of Bengali nationalism which gained strength during the 1970s. This period also provides the context for Suborno's memories. Bengalis' exploitation under the Ayub-Yahya regime[54] resulted in a situation under which the notion of Bengali nationalism became stronger and sharper among middle-class Bengalis as a means of both cultural and political resistance against the West Pakistani rulers. This rising tide of Bengali nationalism acted as one of the inspirational forces behind the Bengalis' victory in the Liberation War.

Now, let us look at the aspects of 'de-aestheticization' of the notion of 'woman' in *Shilalipi*, which, in de Lauretis' view, is a critical but compulsory condition of women's cinema that introduces/signals a deconstruction of the traditional representation of woman. In a classic Hollywood film, woman appears as spectacle, a passive erotic object appealing to the gaze of male spectators. Women's cinema disengages the controlling and objectifying male gaze, and addresses the audience as female. Laura Mulvey also emphasizes the 'destruction' of visual pleasure in women's cinema. She asserts:

> The first blow against the monolithic accumulation of traditional film conventions (already undertaken by radical film-makers) is to free the look of the camera into its materiality in time and space and the look of the audience into dialectics, passionate detachment (1975: 18).

In some instances, *Shilalipi* uses music to engage audience's emotion, a common practice in melodrama and classic narrative film. This film, however, seeks to detach audience's emotion and interrupts the narrative flow by the interjection of a series of flashbacks. It takes

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[54] See footnote in Chapter Three.

viewers back and forth via a constant collapsing of past and present into each other. This disruption of the linear progression of time can foster a critical distance between audience and the cinematic representation.

Shilalipi problematizes the notion of male gaze. Nasreen and the painter, Reza, feel passion for each other, which the film indicates distantly without revealing this aspect directly. In one sequence, Nasreen and Reza are sitting together in a corridor of Nasreen's house, evoking a feeling of intimacy in the moment. In this sequence, Shameem Akhtar breaks up the sense of voyeurism and fetishism which are central to the cinematic pleasure of classic narrative. She captures the whole sequence from the perspective of Suborno. Sitting on a stair far from the corridor, Suborno observes that his mother is reciting a poem to Reza, while Reza is sketching as he sits next to her. This is the sequence in which we see Nasreen wearing makeup and other accessories. She is dressed in a white silk sari with a red border. The magnetism of her appearance and the tranquil tempo of her recitation appear to distract Reza as he looks at her repeatedly while drawing (Figure 5.11). Akhtar, however, skilfully avoids the construction of Reza's look as authoritative or Nasrin as the object of his focus. She does not capture their perspective shots and reverse-shots. Both of them become the object of the gaze of an eight-year-old boy, Suborno (Figure 5.10). Structuring with different angle shots, the whole sequence is revealed from Suborno's point of view. Knowing the emptiness of his mother's life due to her separation from his father, Suborno becomes ecstatic with hope, seeing his mother's togetherness with Reza. Thus through his gaze, Akhtar projects Suborno's own void and desire for someone who would be the lifelong companion to his mother. By pointing out a 'void' or 'lack' in Suborno's life I do not wish to denote his desire for a 'father' figure to head the family. I rather intend to suggest his desire for someone who could make his mother happy.

Figure 5.10 Suborno gazing at his mother's intimate moment with Reza in *Shilalipi* (2002).

Figure 5.11 Nasreen and Reza become the object of Suborno's gaze depicted in **Figure 5.10,** in
    Shilalipi (2002)

In his adult life, we hear Suborno voicing this lack. When he comes to Reza's house

to collect memoirs of his mother, at some point in their conversation, he questions Reza:

'Why did no one want to make her happy?' He, in fact, indirectly accuses Reza of not being

brave enough to break with the traditional values of society by openly being the partner of a

divorced woman (his mother) with a child. Reza confesses that he was not as brave as Nasreen.

In Nasreen's life struggle, we find some autobiographical contents taken from Akhtar's own life. As an unmarried single mother of two children, Akhtar experiences a similar situation to Nasreen. As a professional, Akthar has been a journalist like Nasreen. She worked for nearly 14 years for the *Sangbad*, a prominently daily newspaper in Bangladesh. Both Akhtar and Nasreen have the critical eye necessary to notice the ideological codes and contradictions within a society that suppress the female voice and do not allow women's desires to be fulfilled. In *Shilalipi*, Akhtar includes the mythical story of Sita[55] to show the meta-narrative of oriental culture: how it rewards and esteems the sacrifice of a woman and establishes her as the epitome of purity and a good wife. At one point in the film Mr Asad tells the story of Sita to Suborno and he equates Sita's misery with that of his mother. Suborno then becomes worried. At night, he asks his mother whether she will enter into the womb of mother Earth. Nasreen replies to Suborno, saying that she is not foolish like Sita. However, in her monologue we hear her saying that she is, in fact, more foolish than Sita.

Akhtar and Nasreen are not wives, unlike Sita. Akhtar was never married and Nasreen was a divorcee. However their struggle, to some extent, resembles Sita's, as all of them denote women's position and experience within their contemporary culture. Finally, in *Shilalipi,* Akhtar shows her disagreement with the concept of ideal womanhood as exemplified by Sita. We see that Nasreen does not unquestionably obey her husband, as Sita does. She has the courage to leave her husband because of his contradictory attitude and beliefs. She does not want to testify as to her purity to others, nor does she escape to the

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[55] Sita is the central female character of the Hindu epic, *Ramayana*. She represents ideal Oriental womanhood by steadfastly obeying the wishes and orders of her husband (Ram). Finally, she enters into the womb of mother Earth to prove her purity.

mother Earth. Rather, she faces reality and struggles hard. Moreover, she creates, writes poems, articles, stories and publishes a magazine. Although this fictionalized character Nasreen contains the features of a real woman, Selina Parveen, in this characterization of Parveen, Akhtar projects her own experience of selfhood. Through Nasreen's voice she spells out her conscious or unconscious desires. 'I know Joipur is somewhere there, I'll not be mistaken to recognize it'; we hear this line as a non-diegetic sound through the voiceover of Nasreen, which punctuates the desire of both Shameem Akhtar and Selina Parvin to go to 'Joipur', an unattainable reality of their own.

In her films, Akhtar stays away from displaying rural life in the style of 'the Oriental's orientalism' (Chow 1995: 171) which is a common tactic in alternative Bangladeshi films. Akhtar's films focus on ordinary urban dwellers, and their socio-cultural insight and realities. These films are targeted solely at a Bangladeshi audience and have never been sent to any international film festivals. She clearly rejects any strategies of appealing to the Western gaze, which seeks the exotic display of oriental female oppression and rural remoteness typical in Third World films. Her singular aesthetic choice has largely made her distinct and different from her peers within the alternative film movement. Yet, the sad reality is that Akhtar, as a female filmmaker from the alternative film genre, is twice marginalized. Firstly, she does not have the same exposure or access to the resources made available to mainstream filmmakers. Secondly, her rejection of the normative practices of alternative films has also kept her apart from the various organizational networks and services of alternative films.

Shilalipi avoids traditional star casting. Most of its performers are Shameem Akhtar's friends and family members. Her son Jishnu Brahmaputra plays the role of a young Suborno; her daughter Proma Parboni appears as Sheuli, the daughter of Amal. With the exception of the three leading roles, Nasreen, the artist Reza and Mr Asad, most of the

characters are played by new and amateur actors and actresses. Overall, with her small and selective casting, Akhtar kept the budget of her film to a minimum. She also chose the Beta-cam format for this film, instead that of 35 or 16 mm, due to budgetary concerns. This also helped her to avoid the bureaucracy of the censorship procedure. It needs to be mentioned here that in Bangladesh, films made in Beta format did not require a censorship certificate for screening when *Shilalipi* was made. Its first screening was held in the Press Club. In order to encourage the screening of the film outside of Dhaka, she received support from Proshika, an NGO which works throughout Bangladesh. This organization was also partially involved in the funding of the film alongside her own production house, Mrittika Production.

In the last sequence we see Suborno and Samina come to the *Badhya Bhumi Smriti Soudha* (Slaughter-place Memorial), a place which bears the witness testimony to the mass killing of the Bengali intellectuals in 1971. A background song sung by a female vocalist expresses the silent cry of women, hidden in the broken structure of the memorial edifice. It also triggers our memory of the past:

There are many untold tales, many wounds, much pain
I've swallowed the poisonous drink in each moment holding tears in my eyes
I passed from decade to decade becoming blue from the poison
Oh, *Nilkontho*! You bloom as *Oporajita* (undefeated)…[56]

Although the song evokes the unheard screaming of women, in the end it connotes the inscription of Nasreen as undefeated in the discourse of history. This sequence activates our

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[56] *Nilkontho* is a blue flower which has the shape of human female genitals. In English, it is known as the butterfly pea, blue pea or Cordofan pea. *Oporajita* is another Bengali synonym for *Nilkontho* flower. Its literal meaning is undefeated.

act of remembrance of the past through its contrast with the gestures of the opening shots which captured the caption of a poster: 'The War We Forgot'.

Combining Nasreen's desire and agency over the narrative, Akhtar records the visibility of a woman in the history of the Liberation War. We find a critical feminist practice in *Shilalipi* which focuses on problems and obstacles relating to the position of women in their socio-cultural contexts. This film also bears the signature and vision of a female director. By offering many alternative approaches to mainstream and independent films, *Shilalipi* extends the possibilities of a new aesthetic for women's cinema in the Bangladeshi context and intends to redefine history as 'her-story'.

Chapter conclusion

By foregrounding the theme of the Liberation War, independent filmmakers in many instances endeavored effectively to construct an image of a nation. They employed cinema as a tool for projecting nationalism, focusing on Bengali national identity as its nucleus.

In the process of depicting the past, most of them negotiated a political activity to make sense of the present, indirectly criticizing the socio-political realities of present-day Bangladesh. Thus, on a number of occasions, ideological conflicts between the existing government and the independent filmmakers were inevitable. They strove to explore the theme of the Liberation War from different perspectives through diverse representational strategies, most of which differ from the official interpretation of the same event. However, the mechanism of positioning woman (as mother) as a national symbol received favourable attention in their cinematic discourses, which is found at the core aesthetic of mainstream films. The independent filmmakers also did not focus solely on the supremacy or mastery of Bengali manhood during the war. Moreover, post-war trauma appears in many independent films, depicting a sense of loss in Bengali manhood. A tendency to evaluate or contest

history's privileged truth is apparent in many independent films. These films, however, left untouched the frequent patriarchal ideologies of Bangladesh and assigned women to victimized and subordinate roles.

With the access to different international film festivals and venues, several independent films obtained a global status for Bangladeshi cinema. At the same time, they strategically employed women's oppression or sexual violation in the war films as 'primitive materials' to meet the demand of the western gaze, similar to Chow's explanation about Chinese Fifth Generation films' approaches (Chow 1995: 21). Frequently, the experiences of raped women in the war were interpreted as the cause of national shame in much the same way as it was connoted in the mainstream films. But unlike mainstream films, rape is employed less in a voyeuristic way to display erotic pleasure aimed at male fantasies. However, by their suicide, deaths or mental disorder – the exit mechanism of the *Birangona*s at the end of these films, served, more or less, the same purpose, as the neat subjugation of raped women in mainstream films in maintaining a 'pure' notion of nation.

Again, it needs to be noted that some influential images of women in the context of the Liberation War, which have started to influence the public memory of Bangladeshis, came from films by the independent filmmakers. Among such films *Muktir Gaan* and *Shilalipi* are notable. Both these films were made partly or entirely by women. This testifies to the fact that the involvement of women in filmmaking could offer a revisionist approach that seeks to retrieve women's wartime roles in films as agents of history. Yet, women do not have the same relationship as men to the institution of cinema. Consequently, in most cases, their films are not able to reach the wider audience.

On the whole, women as historical subjects with their subjectivities and real experiences in the war context remain largely absent in independent films.

CONCLUSION

> [T]he methods and approaches of traditional histories have proven problematic for feminists, not least of all because so many documents preserved from the past offer only limited traces of women's presence, while presenting massive evidence of their marginality and repression.
>
> Patrice Petro, 'Feminism and Film History,' 1994: 66.

The history of the Liberation War (*Muktijudhdho*) was not all about the battle action and gunfire between Bengali men and the Pakistani army. It was a popular resistance involving manifold participation of both men and women from different classes, religions and localities. In this research, I have suggested that men and women, despite their diverse involvement and contribution in the war, are framed differently in Bangladeshi war films. Their participations in nation building processes are also depicted as opposites to one another. Men are placed at the center of the narratives with their brave and heroic war action. As such, their sole war effort as *Muktijodhdha*s has been framed as crucial in history to earn the independence of the country. Women appear in war films in supportive/secondary roles and are mostly shown as a victimized group, who are rescued by the Bengali men in the turmoil of the war.

Woman is valorized in one instance, in her idealized portrayal as the 'mother-nation'; this iconic projection of woman, however, highlights more than anything else men's heroic defence of their motherland. Woman in her idealized role as the mother-nation does not hold any political subjectivity. Yet, over the years since the independence, women's cinematic portrayals have not been so static or stereotyped. Some changes have taken place in the construction of masculinity and femininity in war films. We see some recent war films, both from mainstream and alternative film genres, such as *Guerrilla* (2011), *Shadhinota* (A Certain Liberation, 2003), *Shilalipi* (The Inscription, 2002), *Women and War* (2000), center

on the stories of women in the war. In such films, women's multi-dimensional contribution and varied experiences in the war, both as combatant and non-combatant women, are articulated. However, the traditional nationalist discourse depicted in the war films, whether in mainstream or alternative films, remains unchanged: woman implies the role of a suffering form of mother-nation and men are represented as the valiant founders of the nation.

The hidden dynamic of men's active defence of the motherland in war films is to save the mother's sexual purity. Traditionally, the mother seems to connote a life source figure, but now she is in agony due to the invasion by the enemy. Still she displays a pure form of mother figure, the bearer of cultural and national identity. Given that her purity is essential for the maintenance of the distinctiveness of national identity, I have argued that war films exclude the raped women (*Birangona*s) from the narratives towards the end in order to maintain a pure essence of the nationalist discourse. Their exits occur through their deaths, suicide or occasionally by some other means. Lotte Hoek observes this exist mechanism of raped women through their deaths as a form of punishment composed by patriarchy: 'the representation of female sexuality [in Bangladeshi cinema] often comes in the form of punishment, first in rape, then in death' (2010: 146). We do not see any fictional film that deals with the postwar lives of raped women. A very small number of documentary films, such as *Women and War* (2000), *Shadhinota* (2003) and *1971* (2011), record their accounts of the war and experiences following the event. Audiences and particularly the cultural elites, who dominate the discursive construction of the nation in various discourses, hardly take any measure to protest against such stereotyped representations of raped women in Bangladeshi war films and their routine allocation of death/exit to them. However, the elites are very active and loud in expressing their disapproval of the portrayal of a love affair

between a Bengali woman and the enemy (Pakistani soldier), as we saw at the start of this study, in the case of *Meherjaan*.

I have also pointed out that the political views of various ruling governments in different periods have influenced the cinematic articulation of nation and identity in war films. State funding and censorship of Liberation War-themed films are the two main factors with which many filmmakers have had to negotiate, in terms of the stands and ideologies of successive governments, particularly when it comes to their contrasting perceptions of nation and selective focuses on the history of the Liberation War. There exists a clear dispute between the main political parties, the Awami League (AL) and the BNP, regarding their leaders' contributions in the war and the concepts of the nation they promote, which are sequentially Bengali and Bangladeshi nationalism. Bengali nationalism is linked with the linguistic and cultural identity of Bengalis and it bears the essence of a secular notion of nationalism. The AL supports Bengali nationalism, and it claims that Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was the supreme leader of the Liberation War. On the other hand, Bangladeshi nationalism, with its focus on Muslim identity, was introduced by Ziaur Rahman, who is hailed by the BNP as the most prominent leader of the Liberation War and the announcer of independence. However, during the periods ruled by both the AL and BNP, and in other periods governed by different parties and rulers, women's real experiences in the war are ignored both in films and in institutional history. As with the main political parties, filmmakers are also divided in two broad groups and have projected either Bangladeshi or Bengali nationalism in war films. In each instance, *Birangona*s' stories or the various contributions of women in the war are marginalized.

At the beginning of my study, in order to locate the war films' position in the broader canvas of Bangladeshi cinema, I narrated a brief film history of Bangladesh and introduced its national film culture. The purpose of this historical discussion was to contextualize war

films. This is also to draw a comparison between the war films and other genres of Bangladeshi cinema, highlighting the war films' distinctive and influential roles in shaping the perception of national identity on screens. Indeed, by representing and recording the grand episode of Bangladeshi national history, this body of work represents the key films in giving voice to the cultural articulation of nation and national cinema in Bangladesh. However, before focusing on war films' contribution to the concept of Bangladeshi national cinema, I discussed briefly the film history of Bangladeshi cinema from the early period to recent time, and cinema's interconnections with the changing concept of nation and with socio-political realities in different periods. In this connection, I also paid attention to periodic rehabilitations of Bengali Muslims cultural and political identities during different colonial and post-colonial periods of this land.

At the same time, I moved on to depict the conditions of women both in society and in the film industry. I pointed out how women, particularly middle-class women during the late 1960s to 1970s, took initiatives by bearing a modern cultural Bengali identity as a means of protesting against colonial rules and attitude of the Pakistani regime, despite their limited mobility within the social organization. However, in the cinematic portrayals of the period, women's roles in such momentous tasks have not been highlighted. For example, a pre-liberation film, *Jibon Theke Neya* (Glimpses of Life, 1970) by Zahir Raihan, with an allegorical cinematic style, focusing on the theme of the collective struggle of Bengalis for the autonomy of the land in the context of the late 1960s, does not depict women's involvement in the political struggle. My analysis of the film indicates that Bengali women's positioning in a progressive and political film like *Jibon Theke Neya* follows a patriarchal paradigm: in this film, the broader national need for autonomy solely concerns men. Conversely, women are shown as selfish beings, fighting with each other within the domestic domain, and having no involvement in the wider political resistance. However, by using the

famous Tagore song, *Amar Sonar Bangla Ami Tomai Bhalobahi* (My Golden Bengal, I love you), this film introduces the technique of the nation's feminization as a 'mother'. Although this romantic and nostalgic visualization of mother-Bengal in the form of a prosperous land has been a prominent theme in Bengali literary discourses for many years, on the cinematic canvas *Jibon Theke Neya* first depicts the *Sonar Bangla* most emotively by employing the above mentioned Tagore song. However, the iconic mother narrated in this song and the real women characters portrayed in the film are diametrically opposed to one another.

In the first chapter, I also spotlighted briefly contemporary popular cinema in Bangladesh, which is seen by some as a low-grade replica of Bollywood films (Mokammel 1999: 29), and has consequently been rejected by upper and middle-class audiences. The tendency of current popular cinema is towards the formulaic: obscenity, unrealistic singing, dancing, fighting, rape, murder, and misogynist erotics are becoming the stock-in-trade of Bangladeshi popular cinema. In this context, while popular cinema fails to represent a sense of national belonging and cultural specificity, I discussed the genre of war films as the more influential component of Bangladeshi national cinema. By bearing the historical chapter of 1971, which is considered by the majority of Bangladeshis as the most significant event of their history and nation's formation, war films articulate the concerns of national identity and the idea of common belonging. These films construct and re-construct images of the nation, although they have also been affected by different ideological positions of various governments and the national politics of Bangladesh, as mentioned above. However, in the first chapter of this study, I argued that war films are one of the dominant genres of Bangladeshi cinema, and one which played an important role in shaping the perception of 'imagined community' or national identity.

In the Chapter Two, I studied films on the theme of the Liberation War made during the conflict. There, I unpacked the perspective and interests of local and international film

directors who modeled their varied framings of the war. In general, international media represented Bangladesh as the victim and the Pakistani army as the terrifying dictator during the time of the war. The sympathetic capturing of the pain of Bangladeshis, particularly in the Western media and films, could be interpreted in terms of what Susan Sontag calls the West's 'journalistic custom' of exhibiting colonized people as 'exotic' (2003: 65). Even films made by Indian directors are geared towards their own paradigms of the war, highlighting above all the contribution of India. Bangladeshi directors, for the first time, made nonfiction films as a means to record their own suffering, struggle and resistance. Like any other written historical work or artifact, the wartime documentaries of Bangladesh, by providing visual accounts and cues, became a key agent for the collective remembrance of the Liberation War, and the reinforcement of strong national and patriotic sentiments among Bangladeshis. Moreover, these documentaries enabled a generation of Bangladeshis who did not experience the war at first hand to participate in their nation's past, albeit in a mediated and indirect way. However, the aesthetic held in common by all the documentaries on the Liberation War, by foreign and Bangladeshi directors, is to display the suffering of others in the war as a form of 'spectacle'. The Western directors highlighted the pain of Bangladeshis in general to term them as a helpless nation. On the other hand, Bangladeshi directors focused on the victimized groups like women, children and elderly people, to showcase their sufferings in order to rally humanitarian sentiment and elicit an active response from the international community in the course of the bloody war.

In this chapter, I also closely analyzed a Bangladeshi wartime documentary film *Stop Genocide* (1971) by Zahir Raihan. *Stop Genocide* is considered as the most influential visual document of the Liberation War. I discussed the film's Third Cinema aesthetic and how it created a dialectic mode and distancing technique to provoke the audience's critical thinking in order to unmask the conditions and complexities of the war. It also appealed to an ethical

response on the part of the world's spectators to find ways to stop the genocide while the war was happening. In spite of its more progressive Third Cinema layout, I contended that *Stop Genocide* framed men and women differently, adhering to gender stereotypes of nationalist struggle. Bengali men, particularly *Muktijodhdha*s, are glorified for their active service and dedication in the war to free the motherland. By contrast, women are typically represented as passive and mute victims of the war. These images of men and women in the film, and the ideologies encoded in them, further endured for a long time: as this research demonstrates, they continued to influence Bangladeshi cinema for decades to follow.

In Chapter Three, I discussed mainstream Bangladeshi war films made from 1972 to 2011. Covering a wide span of time, I analyzed four significant mainstream movies from different periods: *Ora Egaro Jon* (Those Eleven Men, 1972), *Megher Onek Rong* (Many Colors of the Cloud, 1976), *Aguner Poroshmoni* (Kindling Blaze, 1994) and *Guerrilla* (2011). I argued that the mainstream films functioned strategically for constructing popular memory and dominant perceptions of women, men and nation in the foundational context of the Liberation War. These films also portray men and women in accordance with their socially sanctioned roles and thus reproduce the patriarchal ideology of Bangladeshi society. In these films, we find men as the protectors of the nation and women as protected (by men).

Borrowing, Kaja Silverman's concept of 'dominant fiction', I suggested that Bangladeshi mainstream war films for the most part allocate supremacy exclusively to men. Silverman contends, however, that society's perceptions about what is 'real' are a matter of 'imaginary affirmation' (1992: 24). This is also a *mis*recognition of the penis as the phallus, that secures the male characters' identification with power and privilege. Similarly, different images and stories about men and women available in society, in case of my research this is concerning the Liberation War, which project the collective trust in the single authority of the male subjects, are also to an extent a product of 'imaginary affirmation'.

I pointed out that similar to the 'dominant fiction's central image which is the unity of the family, Bangladeshi mainstream war films also projected the idea of uniting the family through winning the war. The family becomes the microcosm for portraying both the national and the domestic crises, placing women mainly within the domestic sphere. In this connection, it was found that *Aguner Poroshmoni*, introduced a strict gendered division of spaces during the war by suggesting the male's authority over the battlefield or outside world, and the female's sole position within the domestic sphere of the family. Some films, for example *Megher Onek Rong*, maintain the hegemonic purity of the family, in which a raped woman (Ruma) disappears from the family unit by committing suicide having been considered as violated. On the other hand, the principal female protagonist, Mathin remains alive to the end, to serve and maintain the family in her role as a mother even though she is not the biological mother of the son. This is because she is not a rape victim of the war, and so is considered to be pure and an honourable bearer of family values. When she is shown in the war context, we see her nurturing qualities in her role as a nurse in a camp hospital. So women's appearance in the war, particularly when they are outside of the family or assisting male freedom fighters, also link them with their domestic tasks such as, nurturing, or cooking. Uniting the family or forming the nation has been projected as a masculine activity, as inaugurated in the first war-themed film *Ora Egaro Jon*, although this film does include different forms of women's direct and indirect participation in the war. Nonetheless, the dominant image of woman we find in these films, including *Ora Egaro Jon,* is a sacrificing or suffering (but pure) form of mother who embodies the nation.

Following the collective ideology of the national culture, most mainstream war films represented women as suffering mothers, as victimized raped women who are mostly removed from the narratives towards the end, or in supportive roles as nurses, sisters or wives of the heroes. All these women, who are often in need of rescue by Bengali men,

connote a relative passivity. The prevailing images of women in the war, however, could not be described as entirely static over the past 44 years since the independence of Bangladesh, and recently positive shifts are becoming apparent for women in films. For example, in *Guerrilla* (2011), we see a woman who actively contributes to the war effort, subsequently dies by killing a Pakistani soldier and then herself, and is finally acknowledged as a *bir* (hero). Yet, her involvement in the war is shown to be due to her personal interest than that of the nation. The guerrilla Bilkis, with her combatant role in the context of the war is constructed in a way that Teresa de Lauretis argues is not a signifier of a real women, but rather of 'Woman' – 'a fictional' entity of male fantasy (1984: 5). The changes in regard to locating women's agency in the war are likely to remain few as mainstream war films are extensively or entirely constructed and directed by men. As we saw in *Meherjaan*, a woman's perspective runs an increased risk of being accused of misrepresentating history and likely to face a considerable struggle.

Again, it cannot be guaranteed that all women filmmaker will depict women through a feminist perspective or be critical of the nationalist discourse. At present, in Bangladeshi film industry there are a very small number of female film directors. Samia Zaman, Kohinoor Akhter Suchanda, Kabori Sarwarj and Nargis Akter are notable among them. In all of their cinematic ventures, the technique of satisfying the male gaze through the projection and portrayal of 'woman as spectacle' is very apparent. This tendency is even evident in *Meherjaan*.

In the third chapter, I also discussed that concept of nationalism and history of the Liberation War projected in the mainstream war films have also gone through changes over the years since that war. These changes have occurred in tandem with the transformation of cultural politics or the political culture of different eras. Despite the changes, these films remain as ideological apparatuses which place the official version of the 'nationalist

discourse' at their centers. Consequently, the concepts of Bengali or Bangladeshi nationalism shift in the nationalist discourse of these films according to the present government's nationalist preference and position.

Independent filmmakers, on the other hand, criticized the official interpretation of history of the Liberation War, as I discussed in Chapter Four. This chapter explored the cinematic strategies of independent/alternative films in representing women and nation in the films about the Liberation War. To explore the manifold forms and expressions of independent films in depicting the notions of nation and women in war-themed films, I analyzed three independent films from different periods: *Agami* (The Time Ahead, 1984), *Muktir Gaan* (Song of Freedom, 1995), *Shilalipi* (The Inscription, 2002). In spite of their generic classification of independent films, these films are diverse both in terms of length and style.

The independent films emerged in Bangladesh in the 1980s with the 'Short Film Movement', and employed alternative forms and approaches in every phase of the filmmaking process, denying the authority of traditional studio-based film productions. From the beginning, we see a steadfast commitment in these films to the issues of cultural and national identity. The Liberation War is one of the main concerns of independent films, and has been a recurrnig theme in representing identity politics on screens. In addition, heritage, rural life, cultural artifacts, oppression of rural women and ethnic minorities have also received significant attention in these films as primary themes. Drawing on the work of Rey Chow, I argued, that the focus on these subjects in independent films, was a purposeful and prevailing mechanism of independent films that inclined to make the history or cultural tradition or women's oppression an object of 'spectacle', in a process of self-orientalization, to appeal to the visions of both urban elites and foreign audiences (1995).

Initially, the independent filmmakers chose the theme of the Liberation War, national myths, and rural locations as invented artifacts to resist the cultural crisis and pro-Islam moves on the part of the state in the 1980s, when the country was seized by the autocratic General H M Ershad. Later they packaged such materials in their films to gain the attention of overseas audiences. Alongside these issues, the films included women's oppression as 'primitive materials', to exoticize the national images and project their suffering as the emblem of the nation.

Thus 'women in the war', in most instances, even after having received great attention in these films, could not portray women's subjectivity. In this genre, *Muktir Gaan* (1995), a documentary film by Tareque and Catherine Masud, is the first filmic venture which, by portraying the actual journey of a musical group consisting of Bengali men and women during the war, has revealed women's active but noncombatant involvement in the war. However, Tareque Masud's later film on the theme of the war, *Matir Moina* (The Clay Bird, 2002), the first Bangladeshi film to win the International Critics' (FIPRESCI) award at the Cannes Film Festival, portrays women as passive and with idealized feminine attributes. This film and many other alternative films play a progressive role by challenging the views of ruling governments, which, in different periods, have tried to suppress various aspects of the war and the notion of Bengali nationalism. They could not, however, portray or gesture to the real experiences of women during the war. The valorization of the mother as the country or the nation is also evident in these films. However, this aspect is not as central or high-toned in the way it is projected in the mainstream war films. In portraying *Birangona*s, the 'exiting' norm for them towards the end is also evident in these films. However, not all the films dealt with this 'exit' mechanism in the same way.

Going against the dominant war cinema language, these films experimented with the visual techniques and narrative structures. Use of non-linear plots, complex characterization,

location shooting with non-professional actors and actresses are some of the notable and common features of these film that make them different from the typical cinematic characteristics of mainstream films. Their distinctiveness from mainstream film is also evident in their portrayals of the concept of family, shown here as broken in several instances, symbolic of the wider political crisis within the nation. By contrast, in mainstream films, the 'family' signifies a vigorous form of nation, emphasizing a union of family members after the war.

Most independent films portray the supremacy of Bengali freedom fighters in the battleground. Again, some of them introduce the 'lack' in freedom fighters after the war, as we see in *Agami* (1984). The commitment to depicting the diverse historical realities of the Liberation War from different angles is visible in these films. However, even after creating a progressive cinema structure and with socialist commitment to change the social and political conditions, independent films could not deny the melodramatic norms of Bangladeshi cinema. Consequently, these films also maintain the idealization of women and the hero/villain dynamics through the portrayals of *razakar*s (Bengali collaborators) as villainous and freedom fighters as good while the audience's empathetic engagement is heightened through the use of a wide range of songs and music.

I also argued in this chapter, that representations of women are most attuned to their agencies in the war in those films directed by women, particularly by referring to *Shilalipi* by Shameem Akhtar. I termed this film the first 'women's cinema' of Bangladesh that strives to portray women's footprints in history by revealing the narrative of a real historical woman, *Shaheed* (Martyr) Selina Parveen, a writer and editor of the magazine *Shilalipi*. This film carries the signature and perspective of a woman director who by denying the strategy of displaying self-oppression, the common mechanism of alternative films, offered a powerful depiction of a real woman's life. However, not all independent films support the same point

of views towards framing women in the war. The prevailing exit mechanism of *Birangona*s by their death, suicide and mental disorder towards the end of the films is also strongly maintained in these films, connoting them as symbols of shame. Women with their agency and real experiences in the war are also largely absent in these films.

This research has suggested that by excluding women's real experiences of the war, the cinematic memory creates fragmented images of women in the war. It has further demonstrated that the representation of women and nation in the war films of Bangladesh have been affected and shaped by the dynamics of national politics, culture and dominant historiography of Bangladesh that are mostly masculine-centered or male-driven.

I hope that this research has made an original contribution to the thorough understanding of Bangladeshi war films and how they shape the dominant memory of women and nation in the context of the Liberation war, following the prevalent myths of society and ideologies of the wider political context. This study would be a source for the filmmakers, researchers, thinkers and policy makers who would take the next steps to change the existing cinematic convention. It also appeals to the filmmakers for creating a new cinematic aesthetic in order to depict women's agency in history and to address the issue of violence against women in the war as crimes against humanity. A new cinema is urgent – using both fictional and factual elements and approaches – that will make visible the invisible (women) and form an active spectatorship.

APPENDIX

List of Films on the Liberation War of Bangladesh (1971-2011)

Table 1. List of wartime films by foreign directors

Name of the Film	Director	Year of Release
Major Khaled's War	Vaynay Kewley	1971
The Country Made for Disaster	Robert Rogers	1971
Betrayal	Ajay Kardar	1971
Joi Bangla	Nagisa Oshima	1972
The Concert for Bangladesh	Saul Swimmer	1972
Dateline Bangladesh	Gita Mehta	1972
Refugees 1971	Benoy Roy	1972
Joi Bangla (unfinished)	Lear Levin	1972
Rahman: The Father Of Nation	Nagisa Oshima	1973
Nine Months to freedom	S. Sukdev	1975
Human Tragedy	Benoy Roy	Released date unknown
Loot and Last	HS Advani, CL Kaul, DS Sainee, Raghunath Sheth, Pandurang Revankar, PNV Rao, ST Berkley Hill, Mushir Ahmed, GR Thakur	Released date unknown
Durbar Gati Padma [*The Turbulent Padma*]	Ritwik Ghatak	19971

Table 2. List of wartime films made by Bangladeshi directors

Name of the Film	Director	Year of Release
Stop Genocide	Zahir Raihan	1971
Liberation Fighters	Alamgir Kabir	1971
A State is Born	Zahir Raihan	1971
Innocent Millions	Babul Choudhury	1971

Table 3. List of early mainstream fictional war films (1971-1975).

Name of the Film	Director	Year of Release
Ora Egaro Jon (Those Eleven Men)	Chashi Nazrul Islam	1972
Orunodoer Ognishakkhi (In Flames of Sunrise)	Subhash Dutta	1972
Bagha Bangali (Bengal Tigers)	Ananda	1972
Roktakto Bangla (Blood-Soaked Bengal)	Mumtaz Ali	1972
Joi Bangla (Victory to Bengal)	Fakhrul Alam	1972
Dhire Bohe Meghna (Quite Flows the River Meghna)	Alamgir Kabir	1973
Amar Jonmobhumi (My Motherland)	Alamgir Kumkum	1973
Slogan	Kabir Anwar	1973
Abar Tora Manush Ho (Come Again to the Right Path)	Khan Ataur Rahman	1973
Shongram (Struggle)	Chashi Nazrul Islam	1974
Alor Michil (Lit Procesion)	Narayan Ghosh Mita	1974
Banglar Chobbish Bochor (24 Years of the Bengal)	M. Ali	1974
Kar Hashi Key Hashey (Who Laughs Whose Smile)	Ananda	1974
Aj-O Vulini (Still We did not Forget)	Niaz Iqbal	1975

Table 4 List of mainstream fictional war films during the military dictatorships era.

Film	Director	Year of release
Megher Onek Rong (Many Colors of the Cloud)	Harunur Rashid	1976
Shurjo Grohon (Solar Eclipse)	Abdus Samad	1976
Ekaler Nayok (The Hero of this Time)	Shirazul Islam Vuian	1979
Surjo Shongram (The Sun's Strive)	Abdus Samad	1976
Jibon Phirey Elo (Renewed Life)	Khan Khalilur Rahman	1981
Bandhon Hara (The Unchained)	A. Z. Mintu	1981
Kolmilata (The Edible Creeper)	Shahidul Haq Khan	1981
Chitkar (The Shout)	Motin Rahman	1982

Table 5 List of mainstream fictional war films during the 1990s.

Film	Director	Year of release
Aguner Poroshmoni (Kindling Blaze)	Humayun Ahmed	1994
Hangor Nodi Grenade (The Mother)	Chashi Nazrul Islam	1997
Ekhono Onek Rat (The Night is Still Dark)	Khan Ataur Rahman	1997

Table 6 List of contemporary mainstream fictional war films (2000-2011).

Film	Director	Year of release
Joi Jatra (A Victorious Journey)	Tauquir Ahmed	2004
Megher Pore Megh (Clouds After Clouds)	Chashi Nazrul Islam	2004
Shyamol Chhaya (The Tender Shade)	Humayun Ahmed	2004
Dhrubotara (The Polaris)	Chashi Nazrul Islam	2006
Khelaghor (Doll's house)	Morshedul Islam	2006
Ostittey Amar Desh (The Country in my Consciousness)	Khijir Hayat Khan	2007
Meherjaan	Rubaiyat Hossain	2011
Gohine Shobodo (The Silent Sound)	Khalid Mahmood Mithu	2011
Amar Bandhu Rashed (My Friend Rashed)	Morshedul Islam	2011
Guerrilla	Nasiruddin Yousuff	2011

Table 7 List of Early independent fictional war films.

Film	Director	Year of release
Agami (*The Time Ahead*)	Morshedul Islam	1984
Hooliya (The Wanted)	Tanvir Mokammel	1985
Bokhatey (The Derailed)	Habibul Islam Habib	1985
Prottaborton (The Return)	Mostofa Kamal	1986
Chakki (The Wheel)	Enaetul Karim Babul	1986
Aronnya (The Forest)	Khairul Bashar	1987
Shuchona (The Beginning)	Morshedul Islam	1988
Aborton (The Circle)	Abu Sayeed	1988
Duronto (Blustery)	Khan Akhter Hossain	1989

Table 8 List of fictional war films by independent filmmakers in the 1990s.

Film	Director	Year of release
Ekjon Mukti Joddah (A Freedom Fighter)	Dildar Hossain	1990
Amra Tomader Vulbona (We Shall Never Forget Them)	Debashish Sharker	1990
Dhushor Jatra (The Fading Voyage)	Abu Sayeed	1992
Ekattorer Jishu (Jesus of 71)	Nasiruddin Yousuff	1993
Nodir Nam Modhumoti (The River's Called Modhumati)	Tanvir Mokammel	1995
Itihash Konnya (Daughters of History)	Shameem Akhtar	1999

Table 9 List of documentary films on the Liberation war by independent filmmakers in the 1990s.

Film	Director	Year of release
Muktir Gaan (Song of Freedom)	Tareque Masud and Catherine Masud	1995
Muktir Katha (Words of Freedom)	Tareque Masud and Catherine Masud	1999

Table 10 List of contemporary independent fictional war films.

Film	Director	Year of release
Shorot Ekattor (The Autumn of 1971)	Morshedul Islam	2000
Shovoner Ekattor (Shovon's Nineteen Seventy One)	Debashish Sharker	2000
Shilalipi (The Inscription)	Shameem Akhtar	2002
Matir Moina (The Clay Bird)	Tareque Masud	2002
Spartacus Ekattor (Spartacus Seventy One)	Mostofa Sarwar Farooki	2007
Rabeya (The Sister)	Tanvir Mokammel	2008
Noroshundor (The Barbershop)	Tareque Masud and Catherine Masud	2009

Table 11 List of the contemporary independent documentary films on the theme of the war.

Film	Director	Year of release
Narir Kotha (Women and War)	Tareque Masud and Catherine Masud	2000
Tahader Juddho (Their War)	Afsan Chowdhury	2001
Shei Rater Kotha Boltey Eshechi (Tale of the Darkest Night)	Kawsar Chowdhury	2002
Shadhinota (*A Certain Liberation*)	Yasmine Kabir	2003
Shopnobhumi (The Promised Land)	Tanvir Mokammel	2007
1971	Tanvir Mokammel	2011

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