

The Blame Game: War and Violence in Dilruba Z. Ara's *Blame*

Sanjib Kr Biswas¹ and Priyanka Tripathi²
Indian Institute of Technology Patna, India

Article Received: 22 December 2017

Article Accepted: 25 May 2018

Abstract

Contemporary studies pertaining to the 1971 Liberation War of Bangladesh by South Asian women writers have ignited reinvestigation into the intensity of violence, rape and attribution of blame. Ethnicity based gendered violence in 1971 and the sudden shift in the attribution of the blame are some of the issues that have also been dealt with by a few Bangladeshi diasporic women novelists such as Tahmima Anam and Dilruba Z. Ara in their post-2000 novels written in English. Dilruba Z. Ara, a Swedish-Bangladeshi novelist, in her novel *Blame* (2015) emphasises that the blame game is a significant repercussion of war. Ara clarifies that Bengali people blamed Pakistanis for the 1971 genocide whereas Pakistanis blamed Bengali nationalists for not abiding by the Pakistani nationality. This novel, in the form of a *Bildungsroman*, is divided into three parts which narrate the journey of the female protagonist from the bondage of patriarchy towards a liberal life, her engagement in the war and her sexual victimisation in the same war. The mass killing of civilians, plundering of the country and victimisation of women do not end with the war; rather the blame game continues during the war resolution process. Courageous women in the war such as Ara's protagonist Laila and her friend Gita are blamed for their own victimisation. In the context of how the blame game became an important tool to nullify gendered violence in the 1971 war, the paper intends to reread Ara's novel *Blame*.

Keywords

Blame game, sectarian violence, marginalisation, 1971 genocide, *Bildungsroman*, gendered violence

¹ **Sanjib Kr Biswas** is a Research Scholar in the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Indian Institute of Technology (IIT), Patna, India. He is the recipient of two state level prizes for writing. He has presented papers at many national and international conferences, and published articles in refereed journals. Email: sanjib.phs16@iitp.ac.in.

² **Dr. Priyanka Tripathi** is an Assistant Professor of English at IIT, Patna. She has published, among others, in *Indian Literature* (Sahitya Akademi), *Rupkatha Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities, Literature & History*, *Atlantic Literary Review* and *The Commonwealth Review*. Email: priyankatripathi@iitp.ac.in.

But still after oh so many years
We still hurt and shed those tears
And men and women still play that game
And point the finger and pass the blame
Daniels, "Blame Game"

Introduction

In the archives of world history, one finds an inseparable liaison amongst the trio of war, violence and blame. In the context of Bangladesh, to provide an appropriate example to suit the context, one can discuss Bangladeshi women who were ostracised from the saga of the Freedom War of 1971 by the state sponsored history of Bangladesh. It is thanks to the sustained efforts of novelists like Dilruba Z. Ara (1957-), Tahmima Anam (1975-) and Taslima Nasrin (1962-), who in their narratives made it a point to bring to the fore the otherwise cornered contours of women's courage and their multifaceted roles in the Bangladeshi Liberation War, that we know what women contributed. In *A Golden Age* (2007) Tahmima Anam centres her narrative around the contribution made by women in the freedom struggle of 1971; Taslima Nasrin also aligns her narrative in *Lajja* (1994) in a similar direction, showcasing the plight of Bangladeshi Hindu women in the aftermath of the 1971 war. Dilruba Z. Ara's novel *Blame* (2015) is a heart-wrenching tale of the "unsung heroines" of the 1971 war, as mentioned by the author in an interview with *The Dhaka Tribune*. Ara claims:

Blame is based on my personal experience. Though some parts are fictional, most of the characters are drawn from real life, so the story is more or less true.... For me, the important things are how the Bangladeshi psyche was formed, and the role played by the Bangladeshi women during the liberation war. It's time we spoke of those unsung heroines of Bangladesh. (Haque)

Laila, the protagonist, represents women of 1970s' Bangladesh who broke with patriarchal decorum and religious orthodoxy to solely engage in the nation's struggle for independence. Her involvement with student politics, affair with her Hindu neighbour Santo, and association with her Hindu neighbour Gita in the freedom movement, all reflect the secular spirit of Bangladeshi women who made a fair contribution to the war of 1971 but always remained outcasts in the official history of independent Bangladesh. The novel depicts the blame game to be a crucial part of the war game, with an analogy between politics and fiction. The novel's narratives merge with the historical narratives of political movements in 1960s Pakistan, followed by the formation of independent Bangladesh in 1971. Blame is assigned, in the novel, on various occasions: West Pakistanis and pro-Pakistanis were blamed for their role in the genocide and gendered violence; Bengalis, on the other hand, were blamed for being traitorous to the nationality and integrity of Pakistan. Biharis were blamed for their ethnicity-based

collaboration with Pakistanis and Hindus were blamed for following a different culture and ritual. The novel's female protagonists, Laila and Gita, were blamed firstly, for their unwomanly courage and secondly, for being raped by the Pakistani military; subsequently, they lived displaced lives in rehabilitation centres as *Birangonas*, a title conferred upon the rape victims of the 1971 war by the then Bangladeshi Prime Minister, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman (1920-75) (Ara 368). The characters in the novel get entangled in the confusion of the war game and the blame game, switching frequently between the two games. If war is considered to be a crucial game, blame is a game as well (Mortuza). In the same context, this paper discusses Dilruba Z. Ara's approach to the blame game as a direct result of the war game. For the theoretical framework, the paper broadly follows the "Theory of Blame" propounded by Bertram F. Malle et al.

Blame: A Novel of the 1971 Liberation War

Divided into three parts, "1965," "1968-69" and "1970-71," the novel has a prologue titled "1971" and an "Afterwards." In the prologue, the characters of the novel get trapped in the main water body of their native land amidst the corpses of other Bengali men as well as naked Bengali women who were thrown in the river after rape. Morbid violence pervaded everywhere, in the sense that the war was not just a political event; it had percolated down to the day to day life where even nature became the witness of the same. Ara writes, "East Bengal soil is rich with winding rivers, but these days the waterways too had become a battlefield, where fish-mouths carried the stain of human blood, as vultures' beaks did in the sky" (1). The historical narratives of Bangladesh claim that at least three million people were brutally killed and 200,000-400,000 women were raped during the nine-month freedom struggle of Bangladesh (Linton 194). The novel echoes that brutality by narrating a few incidents of the war.

The first part of the novel is a flashback to the days of the political turmoil of East Pakistan in 1965. The third person narrator introduces Laila, who is the eldest daughter of a Kazi family living in Chandgaon, near Chittagong, a port city in East Pakistan (which became Bangladesh in 1971). Laila's childhood memories are characterised by her friendship with a Hindu girl, Gita, and Laila's infatuation with Gita's brother, Santo. Her father Harun Kazi, and her uncle Khaled Kazi, believe in a united Pakistan and they despise the Bengalis who are actively involved in whetting the appetite for Bengali nationalism. Bengali people are referred to as "infidels" by the pro-Pakistanis for not abiding by the idea of the national integrity of Pakistan, and are urged to form a brotherhood not on the basis of ethnicity but on the basis of religion (Ara 36-37). Gopal, Shikha and their daughter Gita suffer from an identity crisis because they are Hindus in a country where they are not wanted (Ara 37). This part ends with the political blame put

on West Pakistan, followed by criticism of the prolonged socio-political prejudices by West Pakistanis towards the people of East Pakistan.

The second part of the novel (1968-69) focuses on East Pakistan's journey towards a civil war based on ethnic issues. The narrative skips three years and in the meantime, Santo's family has moved to Dhaka where his father works as a clerk at Eden College. Laila insists that her parents let her pursue higher studies after completing her secondary school examinations but her parents think that it is unsuitable for a Kazi girl to follow a path that will take her outside the domestic space (Ara 46). After being supported by Aunt Mili and Alam Khan (Laila's would-be father-in-law), Laila succeeds in migrating from Chandgaon to Dhaka for higher education. At first, Laila lives in Alam Khan's Kalabagan residence in Dhaka where she finds her aunt, Khan's wife, Salma Khan, as orthodox as her parents. Nila, the fourteen-year old daughter of Alam Khan, is friendly with Laila who has the support of Alam Khan and Kamil (Laila's would be brother-in-law). The communal tension between Hindus and Muslims since the partition of 1947 is highlighted in this section (Ara 63). Later, Laila moves to the ladies' hostel and there she, along with other girls, such as Rashida and Camilla, espouses revolutionary ideas. The artist Amzad Haq's house becomes the den of the revolutionaries and Laila joins the group with Santo, Gita, Kamil and Jamil. Professor Merina supports the girls and forms a secret revolutionary group with them. The country's youngsters unite against the prolonged prejudices they have been experiencing from the West Pakistani government.

The third part, titled "1970-71" is the longest as well as the most important section of the novel. The characters find that politics and personal relationships start to intertwine. Laila's infatuation with Santo develops into love and Jamil, despite following the same track as Laila and Santo, experiences an identity crisis. In the political sphere, Sheikh Mujib gets the support of all East Pakistanis and wins the parliamentary elections of 1970 with a landslide majority (Ara 160). After Mujib's big win in the election, the Pakistan government intensifies their repressive measures against the Bengali people in East Pakistan and therefore Mujib, in a historic speech on 7 March 1971, declares the independence of Bangladesh and urges his people to defend the land at all costs, including the possibility of fighting a war against the West Pakistani army (Ara 167). Though the 1971 war has been labelled as a Liberation War, it has the characteristics of a civil war. It was a civil war not only because the Eastern wing of Pakistan was engaged in a war against the organised government of Pakistan, but also because it was a war between the supporters of a united Pakistan, on one hand, and Independent Bangladesh, on the other (Hannan). As the war breaks out, Laila's and Santo's families move from Dhaka to Chittagong and then to Potaya and many other places like refugees, imprisoned and abandoned in their own country. Santo, Jamil, Kamil and Jadu join the freedom struggle. Jamil works as an undercover agent in order to spy on the Pakistani soldiers because he knows Urdu

well. Laila, unable to just sit back and tolerate the violence, joins the freedom struggle along with Gita. Once the military find the sanctuary of Laila's family, they kill Laila's father and arrest Laila for killing one of her father's torturers. She is then taken to the military camp and sexually assaulted there. Jamil collaborates with Yousef, a pro-Pakistani, to free Laila in exchange for Gita. Jamil is blamed by Laila, Santo and other freedom fighters who suspect him of collaborating with the pro-Pakistanis. Gita is rescued in a valiant mission performed by Santo, Kamil, Jamil, Laila and a group of freedom fighters; but she has already endured ordeals of all sorts during her stay in the camp where she was sexually abused. Kamil and Santo never return from the campaign and are later found dead. Though Laila and Gita seek shelter in Alam Khan's house, almost everyone including Jamil's mother humiliates Laila and continuously blames them for being "polluted." The Bengalis of East Pakistan attain their cherished freedom and find a new homeland for themselves which they had dreamt of for so long, thanks to the direct intervention of India that led to the ending of the war. However, the sufferings of Laila and Gita don't seem to end as they are disowned by their families. Being pregnant with war babies, they take shelter at a rehabilitation centre. While Laila aborts her child, Gita gives birth to a child which is later adopted by a Canadian couple.

The "Afterwards" section of the novel shows Laila and Gita in a new kind of struggle. They have been trained at the Centre, after which Laila has found a job as a secretary and Gita has become a school teacher. The narrative voice shifts from the third person to the first person. The author shifts her narrative voice from the setting of the 1970s to her contemporary time. She now speaks for thousands of Gitas and Lailas who still continued to be victimised across South Asia, but who did not speak up because "the girls must remain silent" (Ara 368). Because, in a patriarchal society like Bangladesh, as Yasmin Saikia has stated, women's role is to remain oblivious regarding the violence perpetrated upon them; and if they are unable to do so, they might be charged with adultery (*Women, War and the Making of Bangladesh* 91).

Cognitive Blame and Social Blame

Cognitive blame and social blame are the two sides of blame; cognitive blame is constructed from properties inherited from social blame (Malle et al. 148). Regarding the formation of the consciousness of Bangladeshi people about the 1971 war, Yasmin Saikia claims that one-sided historiography only points to Pakistanis as "evil" and Bangladeshis as "good," along with an extreme glorification of the *Mukti Bahini* ("Beyond the Archive of Silence" 277). The Bangladeshi psyche has thus already been habituated to the assigning of social blame against Pakistanis as perpetrators of violence during the civil war in 1971. The formation of cognitive blame from social blame in the Bangladeshi psyche

is apparent in Dilruba Z. Ara's *Blame*. The novel epitomises blame at various levels against the then Pakistani government by the East Pakistani people, drawing references from different contemporary social and political issues. Though blame and anger share some common features, the two should not be fused; anger can end without blaming while blaming can happen without anger (Malle et al. 149). *Blame* shows the display of anger followed by blame and vice versa. The common people of East Pakistan were angry at West Pakistan for exploiting the manpower and resources of the East for their own security as well as political and financial gain. Blame and counter blame between East and West Pakistan go on throughout the novel in the context of the 1960s and 1970s. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the East Pakistani leader, demanded autonomy for East Pakistan, so he was imprisoned in the Agartala Conspiracy Case, which was a complete hoax aimed at disarming him (Ara 89). A few prominent West Pakistani leaders such as Ayub Khan (1907-74), Yahya Khan (1917-80) and Tikka Khan (1915-2002), were accused of depriving East Pakistani people of their rights. In Dilruba Z Ara's *Blame*, the narrator remarks, "They left us totally defenceless, to fight this lost battle over Kashmir with money from our jute and fishing industries" (40). Kashmir, which is politically divided as Indian administered Jammu and Kashmir and Pakistani administered Azad Kashmir, has remained a bone of contention between India and Pakistan since the partition of 1947. India and Pakistan have fought several wars over their right to Kashmir, the world's highest battlefield at an altitude of 20,000 feet (Qazi 18).

In this novel blame is, in most cases, followed by anger and revenge. When the Pakistani military caught Laila's father Harun Kazi and killed him mercilessly, Laila could barely find time to blame, so she pressed the trigger and killed the tormentor of her father (Ara 267). If Laila had not been a freedom fighter, she would have had to be silent, only blaming the tormentors; but here Laila has the courage to exhibit her anger through revenge. She was caught but did not lose her spirit. A Pakistani soldier remarked about her: "Only a bag of bones but so much anger" (Ara 268).

Social blaming is directed to regulate the agent's behaviour by devaluing and criticising his violation of the norm. Social blame is contingent upon time and context; generally, it's the society or a community that decides who will be blamed by whom and for what (Malle et al. 171). In *Blame*, the social blame put forward by the common people, intellectuals and the politicians of East Pakistan turned to be fruitful in a few cases, as it managed to change the behaviour and motives of the West Pakistani ruler. The novel shows the effect of social blaming in the politics of Pakistan at various levels. Sheikh Mujib was released unconditionally from the Agartala Conspiracy Case and Ayub Khan handed over power to the then Army chief Mohammad Yahya Khan who declared general elections in December 1970 (Ara 137-38). Upon realising the intensity of support that Mujib had in those days, Yahya Khan called for a tri-party convention to discuss the

prospect of a National Assembly (Ara 160). Sheikh Mujib won over his Pakistani opponent in the National Assembly and expected that he would be given the post of Prime Minister (Ara 164) but the Pakistani government appeared rather hesitant about handing over power to Mujib, which resulted in violence among the people in East Pakistan. Here blame, as suggested in the theory of blame game, appears to follow anger (Malle et al. 149). The East Pakistanis set fire to the property of West Pakistanis, harassed the non-Bengalis and shouted slogans against the Pakistani government (Ara 164). Sheikh Mujib's speech at the Dhaka Racecourse ground on 7 March 1971 inspired the youngsters to shed their blood for the sake of a nation of their own: "... our struggle this time is a struggle for freedom, our struggle this time is a struggle for independence, *Joi Bangla...*" (Ara 167), Mujib declared unequivocally.

Blame on Political Grounds

In certain segments of the novel, characters get into discussions where they also blame India for having further stoked the fires of the already existing feud between East Pakistan and West Pakistan for its own political interest. Gopal, Harun Kazi, Khaled Kazi and many others frequently discuss the foreign policy of Indira Gandhi (1917-84) and her hidden diplomatic agenda behind sheltering almost thirty thousand refugees and supplying arms to the freedom fighters (Ara 238). India signed a treaty with the Soviet Union to face Pakistan because the Indian government suspected Pakistan's secret alliance with China and America (Ara 261). Taking advantage of its geographical position, India restricted cross-border entry for the Pakistani soldiers with an intention of non-cooperation. Bangladesh became worried about an impending war between India and Pakistan over Kashmir as well as East Pakistan (Ara 262).

The Pakistani military, at the behest of Yahya Khan, committed serious crimes against humanity during the civil war of 1971 in Ara's novel *Blame*. Native Bengali people of East Pakistan blamed the Pakistani army for turning the country into a heap of demolished buildings and dead bodies of civilians. The Pakistani army are also blamed for raping Bengali girls and then killing them, hacking their breasts off and slashing their genitals (Ara 224). The Pakistani military spread the violence extensively with their collaborators in Bangladesh. Bangladeshi-born collaborators of the Pakistani regime were referred to as *razakars*, and helped the Pakistani army to detect the shelters of the Bengali freedom fighters (Ara 263). Mullah Yousef, who was a pro-Pakistani and an active member of the Peace Committee, was blamed for his misconduct against the people of Chandgaon (Ara 279). The blame on the Pakistani military continued not only for killing millions of civilians but also thousands of Bengali intellectuals, as they wanted to destroy the backbone of the nation (Ara 358). The victimisation of Laila and Gita shows the intensity of gendered violence

committed in 1971 by the Pakistani military in Bangladesh. Laila was assaulted by a number of soldiers and was brutally thrown into a heap of dead bodies of women who were raped, murdered and thrown away into hell. A Pakistani flag was painted on her bald skull, which she had shaved before becoming a freedom fighter (Ara 286). Gita was raped first by a Pakistani army officer and then she was thrown among the other Pakistani soldiers who not only raped her but also tormented her to an extreme level (Ara 316). Raped, tormented and humiliated, Gita was forced to live in a compartment full of the smell of “sweat, blood, semen, saliva, urine and other body odours” (Ara 316). The intensity of violence imposed upon Gita was extreme to the extent that she was fornicated with and treated as an “article of trade” (Ara 313) in a village market by the Pakistani soldiers. Due to her poor eye sight, she could feel the torture her body was going through but she could not see the vicious faces of the perpetrators.

Gendered Blame

Women are supposed to play the traditional role and restrict their way of life; otherwise, they receive blame from society (Wakelin and Long 477). Patriarchy thinks that women are the weaker sex and therefore not capable enough to perform tough tasks like that of a male soldier in male regulated regimes (Snow 382). In *Blame*, most of the women are shown to be passive, submissive to the male authority and oblivious to politics and national affairs (Ara 217). Even participating in political processions and shouting slogans with the men was thought to be inappropriate (Ara 131). But then, there were also women like Laila in *Blame*, who emerged courageous. She came to Dhaka for her higher studies, freeing herself from the restrictions of patriarchy and the tag of being a Kazi girl (Ara 148). Her infatuation with Santo reflects her solid mettle as a “love affair between any Hindu boy and Muslim girl was bound to have devastating consequences” (Ara 154). Her decision to engage with politics, to be an activist, and finally to be a freedom fighter are all highly criticised with several attributions of blame on her by her mother, brother and rest of society. In a community where women are born and brought up to be faithful home-makers, devoted daughters and loyal wives, Laila's attempt to break the decorum brings much condemnation for her; “this might make you into an unmarriageable girl,” her mother often tells her (Ara 203).

People assign blame to the rape victims, arguing that the attitudes of the raped, her manners and the way she dressed provoked the rapists to act violently towards her, and that the victim herself enjoyed the event to an extent (Wakelin and Long 477). Laila's engagement in politics, her dress code, her hairstyle, her carrying a gun like a male soldier, all break the traditional notion of womanhood and blame is attributed to her by all in society except for a few characters such as Santo, Kamil and Alam Khan. Dilruba Z. Ara also has defended Laila's courageous attitude. She, through Laila, has taken a completely anti-sexist attitude

to war and asserted, “War and death don’t care about gender” (Ara 233). Through her portrayal of Laila, Ara questions why a woman cannot play the role of a warrior when she can be a victim of war (Ara 234). Accordingly, Laila declares that as a native of Bangladesh, the War of Liberation is her war too (Ara 234-35). Overcoming all the hurdles, Laila takes up a gun to free her nation from the bloodthirsty Pakistani regime, breaking the conventional image of “a sari clad Bengali girl” (Ara 241). She is not afraid of death because she knows that in war people do not chase death but death chases them (Ara 241). She is no longer afraid of what society thinks of her because by participating in the war to free her nation she has found her own agency and inner calling. Ara writes:

She knew they would never forgive her and, if things got worse, they might even disown her. Regardless of whether her decision had been right, Laila was proud of herself that she had made it. It was her decision. She was no longer a child – now she owned herself. For the first time in her life she experienced how it felt to follow one’s inner call. (242)

On a similar note, Yasmin Saikia also expresses her sorrow over the institutional silence of the country on women’s issues and affirms that survivors can speak if they are allowed to do so (“Beyond the Archive of Silence” 277). Laila did not lose her spirit and voice even after being raped, humiliated and blamed by the society. She declares, “I will go and fight for Gita, and die if necessary. A death like that would be thousand times more honourable than living my life as a tarnished woman” (Ara 298). Laila raised her voice against the sexist definition of war heroes in society. She blamed society for only glorifying men for their heroic deeds in war; whereas for the same heroic deeds women are reviled and reprimanded.

Women are often targeted in war prone areas for rape and sexual violence, and displaced from their homes (Shoemaker 34). A rape victim is blamed for her own victimisation if she does not follow her gender role in society (Wakelin and Long 477). The Afterwards of the novel shows the plight of *Birangonas* in the context of Bangladesh. The independent nation-state has silenced the voice of *Birangonas* in various ways. The rehabilitation of the rape victims or *Birangonas* after the Bangladesh Liberation War by the then Bangladesh government was an initial step meant to glorify the women who sacrificed their chastity for the formation of the nation (Murshed 120). Nayanika Mookherjee interrogates the level of public secrecy regarding the lives of *Birangonas*, who are worshipped in the Bangladeshi popular culture as brave and courageous women, but ultimately get blamed in society as *kebota* or polluted women (“Remembering to Forget” 434-35). In Bangladesh, women think it is better to die than to live with their experience of *shorom* [shame] – a condition which Mookherjee has compared with that of mythological character Sita who asked Mother Earth to split and swallow

her in order to save her from her disgrace (*The Spectral Wound* 58). A very popular photograph by Naibuddin Ahmed shows the plight of *Birangonas* in postcolonial Bangladesh as horrible and contradictory to the image of brave heroines that the word implies. In this photograph a *Birangona* is shown with dishevelled hair and covered face, indicating her attempt to escape the shame and blame of being raped (Mookherjee, "The Raped Woman as a Horrific Sublime" 381).

Public secrecy regarding the rape victims is one of the main concerns in Ara's novel, *Blame*. When Jamil inquires as to the whereabouts of Laila with Mullah Yousef, the latter ironically advises Jamil: "A disgraced woman is better left alone. Still better forgotten" (281). Ara further illustrates the issue through Laila's mother's response to her situation:

Hasna Begum had not spoken a word about Laila since she had been abducted; it was as though she didn't know who Laila was, as though she had never had a daughter called Laila. Hasna Begum's lips were shut, she showed neither grief nor anxiety – for who would wish to bear the burden of disgrace brought to a family by a daughter imprisoned at a military camp? (272-73)

Such indifference and silence overshadow the life of Laila and many like her who were abducted and sexually assaulted by the Pakistani military. They face alienation from not only the society they are part of but also from their family members. Their abduction is a one-way journey; in a certain sense they were compelled to leave their home, never to come back. Even when they returned physically, their presence went unacknowledged.

Blame on Religious and Ethnic Grounds

The Hindu community in Bangladesh underwent extreme torture in 1971 because they were considered to be the enemies of the State (Linton 196). Yasmin Saikia points out that many Bengali women were victimised by their own countrymen during the 1971 war of Bangladesh due to their beauty and different ethnicity (*Women, War and the Making of Bangladesh* 61). Gita's beauty and ethnicity works as the principle reason for her victimisation. Jamil hands over Gita to the Pakistani army to get back Laila, his love, prioritising Laila's life over the life and chastity of Gita (Ara 289-90). Laila blames Jamil: "You betrayed Gita, simply because she was a Hindu" (Ara 300). Santo, despite taking the Muslim name Rahim (Ara 204), becomes cautious to an extent as a freedom fighter because he knows that he would be humiliated by the Pakistani soldiers for two reasons: for being a Bengali nationalist and for being Hindu (Ara 173). Gita takes the name Rahima, wears the burqa and learns the verses of the Qur'an well (Ara 208). Gopal grows a beard to disguise himself as Muslim; and Shikha wipes away the red vermilion from her forehead (Ara 227). Hindus faced extraordinary repression and torture during the 1971 war and Ara's narrative portrays a vivid picture of their condition: "Hindu

areas were set on fire. Hindu men's penises were chopped off. Hindu girls were taken prisoners..." (Ara 179). The intensity of sexual violence upon Gita is increased to an extent by the Pakistani army officer because she likes to read the book titled *A Thousand and One Nights*, which is banned in some Muslim countries for the representation of allegedly obscene contents (Ara 315). Gita is referred to as "Hindu whore" (Ara 316) by the Pakistani army officer who threatens to offer her body to dogs to fornicate with her (Ara 316).

A cursory glance at the conflicts in South Asia since the partition confirms that religion plays a big role in the politics of the subcontinent. Bangladeshi writing in English, especially by diasporic writers, has taken religion and sectarian violence as important themes (Hasanat 57). Sectarian violence works as a backdrop of this novel as well. In *Blame*, Alam Khan puts the blame on the British for honing "the antagonism between the Muslims and the Hindus to keep the country under their control" (Ara 117). During the Liberation War of Bangladesh, the freedom fighters were tortured in the name of religion, with their torturers putting the blame for their treatment on the fact that they were infidels and heretics. Jamil was severely harassed by a pro-Pakistani just because of the fact that their family sheltered a Hindu family during the time of crisis (Ara 283).

One of the much neglected aspects of the Bangladesh Liberation War is the victimisation of the people of the Bihari community living in Bangladesh in the post-1971 era. During the 1971 war, the Pakistani Army engaged some Biharis in their civilian group "Peace Committee" (Linton 196). People of the Bihari community were viewed with suspicion by the Bengali people for their collaboration with Pakistani Army. After the war, they were blamed and harassed severely by the Bengali nationalists as a mark of revenge. In *Blame*, the Bihari gardener in Laila's hostel was always suspected without proper grounds just because he was a Bihari (Ara 133). When the war ended and everyone in the novel celebrated the victory of Bangladesh, Laila and Gita still remained traumatised, seeing the victimisation of the Bihari community by the Bengali nationalists. The novel narrates a cruel story of the murder of an old man, his daughter and an infant just because they were Biharis and presumably had taken the Pakistani side during the war (Ara 359).

Blame and Justice

In the case of social blaming, a warrant is an integral part and the blamer is persuaded to show reasonable grounds why the agent is to blame (Malle et al. 149). People are busy with the blame game in Ara's novel, without justifying the blame they assign. The blamers in the novel are preoccupied with social taboos (rape being one) and religious orthodoxy. A raped woman is blamed for her own victimisation just on the assumption that society would not approve of her despite the fact that the woman had no hand in her victimisation. A rape victim

is supposed to receive justice and support, but in reality she is blamed by all, sometimes even by other victims (Wakelin and Long 477).

In a blame game, the blamer is not always right and a cross-check of social blame is needed to bring transparency to cognitive blame (Malle et al. 149). The crosschecking of blame in Ara's novel is not done with any rational insight by anyone except for a few characters such as Laila's father-in-law, Alam and her brother-in-law, Kamil. Laila's mother wished if Laila had been dead like her father, at least she could mourn for her without any hesitation (Ara 273); she even asked God for forgiveness several times for being in the same room with a rape victim (Ara 351). Laila was scared to live in a society which thought her to be polluted; she was even scared to pray because she did not know whether or not God also thought her polluted (Ara 209). Kamil and Santo only defended Laila and said that many girls could have ignored the torture if they could be courageous like Laila (Ara 248). Every female freedom fighter is put forward in the novel with a gun on their shoulder and cyanide capsules in their hands so that they could commit suicide rather than suffering abuse at the hands of the enemy (Ara 249). Laila tolerated the blame put on her by everyone but remained determined to live because she knew that it was her moral obligation to rescue Gita, who had become a hostage for Laila's own release (Ara 296). Though Gita got support from her family after her return from the Pakistani army camp, she was blamed by society firstly for being abducted by the Pakistani army and secondly for being a lower class Hindu girl abducted by Muslim men. Thinking of her prospects in society, Jamil was afraid of rescuing her from the camp as this society would blame her for bringing disgrace and for being a "fallen woman" (Ara 321). Despite showing mental support to Gita, her family disowned her in fear and never came back to look after Gita (Ara 334). The blame game continued even between Laila and Gita, who had been the closest of friends since childhood. Gita blamed Laila for being disowned by her family and for her status in society as a "disgraceful whore" (Ara 335).

The rape victims in the 1971 genocide were blamed by society and disowned by their families for carrying war babies (D'Costa 195). Bina D'Costa's interview with Dr. Geoffrey Davis, a medical graduate from Sydney, NSW, underlines the role of blame in wiping out thousands of raped Bengali women in post-liberation Bangladesh. Dr. Davis was appointed as a medical officer in Bangladesh for six months in 1972 by international organisations such as UNFPA and WHO to oversee the process of abortion or adoption of the war babies. In the interview with D'Costa, he said that many women wished to keep their babies alive but unfortunately, they were forced to kill them to get rid of the blame of polluting society. In *Blame*, Laila and Gita were considered as defiled for carrying war babies. But unlike other Bengali women, Ara's protagonists are courageous enough to stand up to the very society that defiled them and referred to them as "polluted." Laila dared to shock her relatives, telling them about the baby she

was carrying (Ara 254). For having war babies in their wombs, Laila and Gita were expelled by Salma Khan from their house because Salma Khan was afraid that Laila and Gita might pollute her own daughters (Ara 365). When Laila and Gita were walking towards the rehabilitation centre, everyone closed their doors because witnessing raped women pregnant with war babies was a matter of disgrace to them (Ara 366). They knew that they had been living in a society devoid of justice. Women are born here only to be blamed. They still held on to their courage to go on with their lives: “To them it was just the last station on a long journey. There was no going back. They had come far; the journey from now would be on a different route” (Ara 366).

Blame Game as a Part of War Game

The postcolonial crisis of identity in Ara’s novel is prominent, with the war being solely blamed for the crisis the nation was facing during this time. Ara shows war as a multifaceted game with many other functions apart from killing people, raping women and demolishing properties. When people become refugees and struggle for freedom in their own native land, it becomes a crucial face of war (Ara 186). When Laila watched Aunt Sima naked in her madness, she was reminded of another face of war, “A naked face” (Ara 191). While travelling in a boat overnight to find a safe shelter during the war, Laila explored another face of war “smeared with sweat, urine and excrement” (Ara 220). War and blame both are games to the people who are engaged in war actively or passively. When Gita was captured by the Pakistani army, she was not only raped and humiliated but she also became an object of the war game as well as the blame game. One of the soldiers proposed to another soldier in the camp in which Gita was imprisoned: “We each pull a card. If we pull a red card in succession, we will kill this infidel. . . . And if the cards are mixed colours? . . . Then we throw her out into the yard” (Ara 318).

The insignificance of human life, the irrationality of human behaviour and the unpredictability of events during the civil war have been reorganised with a sense of love through the love-triangle of Laila, Santo and Jamil. Laila’s growing tension during the war, her identity crisis and the prejudices she encountered as a woman soldier became absurd when she thought of Santo and his feelings for her. “She was in love, and even though something terrible called ‘war’ was happening in the real world outside her body – within her, love was growing. It was closer to her than fear! It was stronger than war!” (Ara 199). Jamil’s shifting role as a freedom fighter became possible because of his true affection for Laila. He changed his role frequently from a reserved Muslim, a freedom fighter, a Pakistani agent, to a betrayer and an infidel. During wartime, each and every individual behaves in an unusual way because “In abnormal times it is only normal to react in abnormal ways” (Ara 352). Betrayal during wartime is thus a

subject beyond the curse of blame because betrayal and war are inseparable (Ara 352). Love experienced during the war enabled the protagonists of the novel to think of love songs and poetry instead of violence and trauma (Ara 312). Jamil was blamed by Laila on several occasions for being communal (Ara 347), but he did not defend himself because he loved Laila beyond everything. Jamil is a character who faced blame not only from Bengalis but also from Pakistanis and he had no way to defend his deeds. Only Alam Khan defended Jamil and understood that his son committed the offence of his love for Laila, who was his “Juliet, his Nur Jahan” (Ara 351). Jamil at the end of the war becomes a target of the Bengali nationalists because they found out that he had collaborated with the pro-Pakistanis and Pakistani military to victimise Gita. The sense of Love raised the spirit of all the characters to participate in the war for Bangladesh and this same love made Jamil, Laila and Gita outcasts in their own country. Jamil asked Laila, “Don’t you find it strange that for all our love for Bangladesh, both you and I have become pariahs here?” (Ara 360).

Conclusion

Emphasising the positive aspect of social blame, Malle et al. suggest, “Blame emerges as one of the most accepted forms of moral criticism, along with finding fault and pointing the finger. The acts that are least socially acceptable and most unlike blame are attacking, slandering, and vilifying” (171). Ara faithfully captures the sentiment of social blame that engulfs the socio-political landscape of the Liberation War of Bangladesh. In most of the cases, blame for her is devoid of any morality and reason for it has been exploited to victimise the Bengali civilians, demolish resources, torment Biharis and rape Bengali women. While attributing social blame, emotion has to be under full control for an unbiased outcome (Malle et al. 171). The author has multiple emotions connected with the birth of Bangladesh but, unlike the native historians and novelists, she successfully puts aside her personal feelings to provide her version of truth. Where most of the Bangladeshi narratives are unidimensional, reflecting the Pakistanis as perpetrators, Bengali nationalists as war heroes and Bengali women as victims of rape, Ara’s novel showcases the bitter side of the war, especially through the portrayal of the victimisation of non-Bengali people in an independent Bangladesh. Therefore, the blame appears to be a pretext in the garb of which Pakistan and Bangladesh tried to nullify their crimes during the Bangladesh Liberation War.

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