

Negotiating the Politics of Power: Tahmima Anam's *The Good Muslim* and Women's Role in War and Nation-building

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Abstract

In the grand narratives of the history of Bangladesh's birth, women's wartime experiences and their contributions have been pushed to the periphery to institutionalise male monopoly on the annals of war. Even the voices of those who had been sexually violated have been silenced. Only a line or two can be found in the official stereotypical grand narrative of the Liberation War about their sacrifice. In this paper, analysing the personal narratives of Maya and Piya, the two central characters in Tahmima Anam's *The Good Muslim* (2011), I argue that although war mobilises women to be politically active, in the aftermath of war they are relegated to a subordinate status. Additionally, analysing Maya's reversal of roles from an active participant to a reproductive agent, I reiterate that female and male participation in nation-building is regulated by socially constructed ideas of masculinity and femininity.

Keywords

Bangladesh, Liberation War, nation-building, *The Good Muslim*, silenced voices, prescribed gender identities

Despite having two female prime ministers for the last twenty-six years (from 1991 to present, except for 2007 and 2008), women in Bangladesh are still marginalised and have not been able to exert much power in the public arena. Women have largely been confined to a marginal space when it comes to asserting themselves in the public domain. A glance at the history of the birth of Bangladesh gives testimony to the fact that even women's active involvement in the Liberation War of 1971 and, later, their contribution to rebuilding the war-

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torn country, have been very surreptitiously overlooked in the grand narratives of the nation's emergence. Although in the war women suffered the most, their sufferings and contributions to the formation of the country have been disregarded in order to eulogise male heroism. Even voices of those who had been sexually violated and paid the highest price to gain the country's freedom have been silenced. Only a line or two can be found about their sacrifices in the official stereotypical grand narratives of the Liberation War. Instead, the focus has been on male achievements. In this paper, through an extensive discussion of the personal narratives of Maya and Piya, the two central characters in Tahmima Anam's *The Good Muslim* (2011), I argue that although war mobilises women to be politically active, in the post-war period, "politics of active national forgetting" (Saikia 7) obliterates their contribution to the formation of the nation for fear of losing privileges associated with masculine identity. Additionally, using Sikata Banerjee's theory of nationalism and gender, I analyse Maya's reversal of roles from an active participant to that of a reproductive agent to demonstrate that female and male participation in nation-building is regulated by socially constructed ideas of masculinity and femininity.

Maya: Representation of Women's Contribution in War and Nation-building

Although the construction of the nation-state involves the collective effort of both men and women, the latter have historically been assigned roles that consign them to the fringes both socially and politically. While most historical and critical narratives of the Bangladesh Liberation War are simply tales of male heroism, a closer look at the original history of the war reveals that women too played a very significant role in the construction of the nation both during and after the freedom movement. Nation-building history has generally been gender-biased; it has at almost all times prioritised male valour and courage while under-representing women's contributions. In *The Good Muslim*, the personal narratives of Maya and Piya, who have contributed to the birth and rebuilding of Bangladesh in different ways, shed light on how women's role in nation-building has been overshadowed by male heroism. We see that despite Maya's contribution to the liberation of 1971 in multifarious ways, she is not acknowledged; rather, what is highlighted is her brother Sohail's participation in the war. Both the brother and the sister left home during the Liberation War to take part in the freedom fight. While Sohail participated in guerrilla warfare against the Pakistani army, Maya contributed by treating and nursing the wounded soldiers. She had gone with troops risking her life and performing surgery on the wounded soldiers without proper medical equipment:

She remembered the sight of dead men with their hands tied behind their backs, their faces lapped with blood, and she remembered every day she had

worked in the camps, scooping bullets out of men with nothing but a spoon and a hunter's knife. (Anam 96)

Moreover, Maya tried to raise awareness against the war and sought assistance from the world through writing. Her article, "The World Looks on as Bangladesh Bleeds: A Cry for Help" (85), though not published, is a manifest expression of how she wanted to make a difference in the war through her writing.

Even in post-war Bangladesh, Maya continues her efforts to rebuild the war-ravaged country. Both Maya and her mother Rehana work as volunteers in the Women's Rehabilitation Centre, assisting the sexually assaulted and traumatised women back to normal life. At the Rehab Centre, Maya works as a doctor performing abortions on the rape victims. She saw her work to be as patriotic and important as the guerrilla combat that the men, including her brother, had fought. Those who came to the Centre needed someone to help and console them, and Maya did that favour to these devastated women. However, she herself felt tormented by her act knowing that the words of hope she constantly used to heal these young women were not necessarily true. Maya's mental distress becomes explicit as Anam writes:

Maya was tasked with telling these women that their lives would soon return to normal, that they would go home and their families would embrace them as heroes of war. She said this to their face every day knowing it was a lie. (69)

Fully aware that her words of consolation may not be factually accurate, Maya still used them so that these women could regain their courage and confidence to brave the world and to restore faith in themselves.

Maya's experience in the camp where she performed abortions on young women who had been sexually violated by the enemy soldiers is no less haunting or traumatising. Despite her reluctance to perform the aborticides, she had to get rid of the "unwanted babies" (42). To many, her contribution to the building of the country may seem insignificant compared to the active combat of the (male) soldiers, but to Maya and many others like her, feticide is much more emotionally challenging. Whereas the soldiers "killed as a matter of principle" (51) to save the country from the aggression of the enemy, Maya had to kill the innocent lives of the "war babies," "the children of rape" (42), for their mere "crime" of being fathered by the enemy. Maya could not accept that she had to be part of such brutal killings and to this day she is tormented by her guilt and is "struggling to repay" the debt that she had racked up for the "abortions she had done after the war" (51). Her work at the Women's Rehabilitation Centre may give rise to questions regarding the ethical aspect of the work, but she did what she could as a young doctor to rebuild the war-torn country. Again, in the newly born country, as an atonement for the aborticides, Maya gives up her dream of

becoming a surgeon and chooses instead to be a gynecologist, “a lady doctor” (11) bringing new life to earth to repay for each baby she aborted during the war. As the narrator comments,

She didn't think of the debt she was repaying, that each of the babies she brought into the world might someday be counted against the babies that had died, by her hand, after the war. (11)

Maya's decision to practice in the rural areas of Bangladesh where her expertise was needed most can be considered as her redemption for the “crime” she had committed in the post-war era. In Rajshahi, she sets up her own clinic and immerses herself in helping the village women with safe delivery of babies and teaching them about birth control and hygiene. She not only succeeds in bringing down the death rates of children but also gets involved in the overall welfare of the villagers.

Maya does not stop there; even so many years after the war, she finds ways to contribute to the nation. After coming back from Rajshahi to Dhaka in 1984, she starts writing for an underground radical publication to spur the conscience of the citizens and provoke them to rise against the dictator Ershad, who was then ruling Bangladesh, and free the country from the grip of his totalitarian rule. She also plays an active role in the movement to prosecute war criminals. But unfortunately, just as a woman's work within the household goes unnoticed, her contribution to the community and the nation goes unacknowledged. Her efforts remain unappreciated by all, even by her brother Sohail. When Maya wants to be given some respect for her involvement during and after the war in rebuilding the country, Sohail thinks that she is selfish because she has not experienced the trauma that he has been undergoing as a freedom fighter,

... he thinks of all the people who have died – the enemy combatants, and the people he didn't save, and his friend Aref, and all the boys who went to war and were killed. Every day he thinks of them. How very selfish of [Maya] to want a piece of that. (125)

Even the then prime minister did not pay proper tribute to the women who had fought in the war. In the newly independent country, the Father of the Nation wanted “to see the faces of *the boys* who had delivered the country” (139; emphasis added), turning a blind eye to the women's contribution in the war. Although the exact number is unknown, many women participated as active combatants, but regrettably, they have not been recognised and appreciated. Out of a total of 676 gallantry awards that the post-war government had awarded to freedom fighters for their bravery and courage, women received only two.

Piya: Representation of the *Birangonas* (“War Heroines”)

Women’s participation in nationalist movements has not necessarily guaranteed them greater rights and freedom in the aftermath; more often than not, they have been faced with disappointment and lack of opportunities. This cannot be truer than in the case of *birangonas* or “war heroines,” an appellation the Father of the Nation, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, bestowed upon women who were sexually assaulted by the Pakistani army. According to various sources, during the nine-month war some 200,000 women were raped and, although it is difficult to estimate, records indicate that roughly 25,000 women were impregnated (Brownmiller 84). In Louise Harrington’s view, the number was so large that it posed a serious problem to the post-war nation-building process (16). The name *birangona* was originally intended to honour all women – political activists, freedom fighters, rape survivors and so on – who participated in the national struggle (Kamal 16). It was also intended to give the rape survivors an honorary status and provide them with equal access to privileges in the public sector, such as education and employment rights granted to the male freedom fighters (Pereira 6). Unfortunately, however, the tag soon became a signifier of shame and humiliation, and in many cases led to refusal and rejection by the families. In fact, Prime Minister Mujibur Rahman’s declaration of the rape victims as national heroines was, in American Feminist writer Susan Brownmiller’s words, “the opening shot of an ill-starred campaign to reintegrate them into society” (83). The title *birangona*, intended to bring them honour and respect and help them reintegrate into their communities, turned out to be a mark of dishonour and disgrace. For this reason, many women did not accept the title because, as Faustina Pereira comments, “to do so would be tantamount to focusing on the scar of rape on the victim, thus forcing her to risk a social death” (62). Consequently, *birangonas* gradually became socially vulnerable, ideologically marginal and eventually silenced by patriarchy (Ahmed).

Piya, the woman who one day appears at the doorstep of Maya and Sohail’s house, functions as a representative of the *birangonas*. Anam uses Piya to relay some of the sufferings and hurdles that the *birangonas* had gone through in the immediate post-war period. Piya, along with a fourteen-year-old girl, was captured by the Pakistani army and kept in captivity for nine months. The “bracelet-shaped scar” (Anam 72) on Piya’s two wrists screams out the agony of all the women who had to endure the excruciating pain of being held captive and repeatedly raped by the Pakistani army. Piya’s agonising recollection of her days in captivity reads:

We were chained to the wall. Someone had been there before us – we saw her name scratched into the wall. She hanged herself, so they shaved our hair and took our saris.... Twenty, thirty [men]. They took turns. After the other girl died, it was just me. (292-93)

The harrowing narrative exposes the trauma and ignominy of *birangonas* in captivity. The atrocities committed upon the *birangonas* were so heinous and rampant that Suzannah Linton equates it with the Japanese sexual assaults during the Second World War. In Linton's words, "the sexual violence deployed in the Bangladesh war appears to have been used as a weapon of war, and has been likened to the World War II Japanese rapes in Nanjing." After the war ended, it is Sohail who rescues Piya from the camp and tells her to come to him if she ever needs any help. Therefore, when Piya appears at Sohail's doorstep and asks for refuge, it becomes obvious that she has been rejected by her family. Although Sheikh Mujib had told the families to accept the *birangonas* wholeheartedly and "asked their husbands and fathers to welcome them home, as they would their sons" (Anam 142), very few families embraced them. No steps were taken to ascertain the acceptance of the *birangonas* by their families, nor was any help extended to them by the social institutions. Thus, being renounced by both family members and society, these women were destined to a life of ostracisation. The government had also done very little to alleviate their miserable and lonely existence. The nation took the women's help when it needed but after the war was over, it did very little to rehabilitate them. The father of the nation attributed to them the name "war heroine" and merely pleaded with the families to take them back, without ensuring their reincorporation into the social fabric of the country.

The honorific "birangona" can hardly erase the humiliation of rape and the agony of rejection by family members. To add to their misery, the victims were told to forgive and forget and move on. Anam writes,

It was time, they were told, to forgive. Forgive and forget. Absolve and misremember. Erase and move on. The country had to become a country. Just as it had needed them, once, to send their brothers into the fighting, to melt their pots and surrender their jewellery, so it now needed them to forget. It was the least they could do. (70)

Ironically, just as the *birangonas* were urged to forget and move on, they too were forgotten by the nation. Nayanika Mookherjee, a prominent Bangladesh Liberation War scholar, articulates that this title merely made the rehabilitation and recuperation of their "female virtue" a matter for national judgement and did not stop the *birangona* from silently vanishing from public consciousness (160-61). In fact, their very existence has been nullified. Their absence is apparent even in the schoolbooks that teach students names of the Bir Protik, Bir Srestha, Bir Uttam (titles that were attributed to the male freedom fighters for their heroic contribution in the war), but never those of the *birangonas* who sacrificed their chastity and dignity for the freedom of the country.

After staying with Maya, Sohail and their family for some time, Piya suddenly disappears. The reason of this disappearance remains a mystery until Rehana's resentful words reveal that she left because she did not want to abort her baby. Rehana tells Maya:

Why do you think she left?... They forced her. And she is not the only one. Some of the girls don't want to. But they're ashamed, they're told they're carrying the seeds of those soldiers. (Anam 142)

Rehana's embittered words draw attention to yet another injustice done on the rape victims who found themselves pregnant. Sexually assaulted women were urged to "forget" their experiences, "rehabilitate" themselves back into society (70) and view themselves as "heroines" (223) who contributed to the formation of the new and free nation of Bangladesh. They were told to "erase all traces of what happened to them" by getting rid of the "seed of those soldiers" (142) who had violated them. Hence, orders were given by the government for mass abortion and adoptions. But when the then Prime Minister of Bangladesh, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman declared that he did not want the children of war, he was, to a great extent, insensitive towards the maternal love of those women whose babies were being aborted. Numerous state sponsored rehabilitation centres were set up where the victims could have abortions. Brownmiller writes that in the first month of the operation the "Dacca clinic alone reported doing more than one hundred terminations" (84). These abortions were not only sanctioned and encouraged by the government, but were almost forced on the women. That in many cases the abortions were forcibly imposed on the rape victims becomes evident in a statement provided by Maleka Begum, a doctor who was in charge of a rehabilitation centre in Dhaka. In a conversation with Amena Mohsin, Maleka Begum reported that during the first three months of 1972, 170,000 rape victims underwent abortions, even against their will (Mohsin, "Silence and Marginality" 137). Furthermore, most of these abortions were performed by inexperienced doctors, and the babies were left to the mercy of the junior doctors. That the wellbeing of the rape victims and their babies were of lesser importance to the nation becomes apparent in Maya's following comment: "the war babies, the children of rape, had been left to junior doctors, the volunteers in ragged tents on the outskirts of town" (51). The moral and ethical aspect of abortion of the war babies weighs heavily on Maya, who realises that the entire situation is quite complicated. But despite her own reluctance, she does what is expected of her as a citizen. In this way, the state, instead of acknowledging the sacrifice of the rape victims, exercised authority over their bodies and maternal role through abortion and forced adoption programmes (D'Costa, "*Birangona: Bearing Witness*" 83). Consequently, these women were

robbed of their agency to articulate their free will and show resistance to the state sanctioned policy of purifying the nation of the enemy blood.

The intention behind the decision of mass abortion and adoption of war babies apparently may have seemed good in the eyes of the stakeholders of the state, in the sense that the government wanted the *birangonas* to start life afresh, erasing all the traces of their misfortune; but the decision makers surely disregarded the emotions and freedom of choice of the would-be mothers. It never occurred to them that as mothers, these women may have feelings for their unborn babies. Many of these women did not want to abort their babies but were, nevertheless, persuaded and in some cases, even forced to do so because the government did not want any war babies who were fathered by the Pakistani soldiers. Sheikh Mujib had declared that “none of the babies who carry the blood of the Pakistanis will be allowed to remain in Bangladesh” (D’Costa, “Turtles Can Fly” 26). In *Ami Birangona Bolchi*, eminent social worker and feminist writer Nilima Ibrahim mentions that, when asked about the fate of the war babies, Sheikh Mujib replied, “please send away the children who do not have their father’s identity.... Besides, I do not want to keep those [*sic*] polluted blood in this country” (qtd. in D’Costa, “Turtles Can Fly” 26). There were many women who, regardless of the disgrace associated with the war babies, wanted to keep them, but very few had the courage shown by Piya to defy government’s orders. Piya does not succumb to the patriarchal political policy, and instead gives birth to her son, to whom society had given the death sentence. She names him Sohail, “after the man who rescued [her]... the man who saved [her] life” (Anam 293). Regrettably, the nation not only forcefully got rid of the babies but also tried to avoid discussion about them. Bina D’ Costa has rightly stated that, “[i]f we turn back the pages of Bangladesh’s history... there is still complete silence when it comes to the babies of war” (“Nationbuilding” 13). Their sufferings and sacrifices have been pushed into oblivion. Piya’s disappearance from the life of Maya and Sohail symbolises the disappearance of the *birangonas* from society. Their contribution and existence have been obliterated. What they were left with was the tag of *birangona*, which, as mentioned before, instead of dignifying them, led them to lifelong stigmatisation. Although the then government had initiated multiple programmes and promised proper rehabilitation of the *birangonas* in society, very few of those have materialised. Even to this day, their wish to be called *muktijuddhas*, or freedom fighters, rather than *birangonas*, remains somewhat unfulfilled. Although a bill was passed on January 29, 2015 to recognise *birangonas* as freedom fighters by preparing a list of their names, it has a long way to go. So far, till July 9, 2017, only 185 *Birangonas* have received the status of freedom fighters (“15 More Biranganas”).

Reversal of Women's Role after the War

It is not only the *Birangonas* who faced disillusionment in the post-war period, women *muktijuddhas* who took part in the liberation of the country also felt discontentment. Usually Bengali women have little choice but to follow the traditional norms of society set by patriarchy. They stay within the boundary of the home and play the role of caregivers as mothers, daughters and wives. But during the Liberation War it was seen that they crossed the threshold of their home and became part of a wider political insurgence. They forsook their normative gender roles and took part in the liberation of the motherland, risking their lives. Some even went to the neighbouring country India for guerrilla training. But after the war was over, a reversal of roles took place. During the war, many women like Maya and Sultana became agents of change and took charge of themselves by participating in guerrilla resistance but, unfortunately, although they were given entry into the public space of war, after the war they were again pushed back into the private realm of the household. In this regard, D'Costa explains:

... although their political activism played a crucial role in achieving independence, after their country was born, these women were encouraged to go back to their traditional roles as wives, mothers and daughters, and as protected and vulnerable beings. ("*Birangona: Bearing Witness*" 95)

A reversal of role is seen in the case of Maya too. Maya is portrayed as a very progressive and modern woman at the beginning of the novel, but she fails to maintain that dynamism as the novel progresses and instead embraces the traditional life of getting married and bearing children. Maya, a doctor committed to breaking away from superstition and tradition, at the end conforms to society's norms. Initially, we see her revolting against the very idea of marriage and bursting out at Joy saying,

You can't marry me. You can't marry me and turn me into one of those women, with the jewellery and making perfectly round parathas and doing everything my mother-in-law says and only letting nice words out of my mouth. (Anam 230)

But she ultimately succumbs to Joy's persuasion and marries him and later becomes mother of a daughter, Zubaida.

Indeed, nationhood, as feminist scholar Nira Yuval-Davis states, usually involves specific notions of "manhood" and "womanhood" (*Gender and Nation* 1). In the construction of nation, women are assigned a particular role, which is either the role of the nurturer or reproducer of the next generation. They are seen as "biological 'producers' of children/people" and hence their importance is limited to their "reproductive roles" (Yuval-Davis, "Nationalist Project" 12).

Likewise, Jeane J. Kirkpatrick asserts that the most difficult barrier to women's political participation is that of sexual roles, especially that of being wife and mother. Men undertake the duty of policing the norms prescribed by society and ensure that women remain within their assigned gender roles. While Maya was mobilised during the war to take part in the freedom movement, after independence she is ultimately obliged to take on the role of the socially constructed identity of wife-mother. As Nahla Abdo suggests:

... in almost all liberation movements where women were actively involved, a general reversal of their roles became the fact of life after national liberation and the establishment of the nation-state. (150)

Throughout history, women's political involvement has been clandestinely denied under the guise of their domestic responsibilities. The reversal of Maya's role from a nation builder to an agent of reproduction reaffirms the fact stated by Sikata Banerjee that nationalism is not only socially constructed but is also gendered (*Make Me a Man!* 6). It draws on socially constructed ideas of masculinity and femininity to shape female and male participation in nation-building (Banerjee, *Make Me a Man!* 6).

Reasons Behind Silencing Women's Voice

Nationalism's affinity for male society has been pointed out by George L. Mosse whose analysis of the linkage between nationalism and bourgeois respectability confirms women's status in society compared to that of men. As he states,

Nationalism... assigned everyone his place in life, man and woman.... Alongside the idealization of masculinity as the foundation of the nation and society, woman... was at the same time idealized as the guardian of morality and of [the] public and private order. The roles assigned to her were conceived of as passive rather than active... guardian, protector and mother. (16)

If analysed from this perspective, it can be seen that no matter how actively women participate in any political movement, they are associated neither with nationalism nor with nation-building. Rather, they are seen as protectors and nurturers. Yasmin Saikia in her book *Women, War and the Making of Bangladesh: Remembering 1971* propounds that there is an abundance of narratives generated in Bangladesh about the war, which were published as memoirs, novels, district level reports and accounts of war crimes; however, all these documents have recorded the war as a narrative of masculine triumph. Saikia explains:

We suddenly find we do not know the Bangladeshi women. Our lens was focused on a single vision thus far. We saw Bangladeshi women as victims of

sexual violence and caregivers. We did not encounter Bangladeshi women as aggressive agents desiring to kill and be killed on behalf of territory and nation. (188)

That women could also be agents of militant resistance and direct combat was not at all recognised. Even the official 14-volume documents on war titled *Bangladesher Swadhinata Juddho, Dalilpatra* (1982), published by the Bangladesh government, fail to provide much information about women's participation. In the narratives of war and nation-building women were mentioned only as victims, devoid of any agency.

Hence, the liberation war of 1971 became synonymous with masculine heroism while keeping women's multifarious participation in the Liberation War in the shadow. Even though women like Maya, her mother Rehana who worked as volunteer at the refugee camp, or her friend Sultana who drove supply trucks, risking her life, participated in the war as active agents. But in the history of the country's independence these women are remembered only as victims and not as participants. Women had participated in the liberation of the country in myriad ways as fighters, informants, nurses and weapons smugglers; many women underwent training in guerrilla warfare and first aid while others risked their own and family's lives by giving shelter to the freedom fighters. War heroes are not only those who fought face to face with the enemy; war heroes are also those who partook in the freedom of the country in other possible ways – be that by cooking food for the fighters or by nursing the wounded soldiers or sacrificing their feminine dignity to get information from the Pakistani army and informing on them to the freedom fighters.

The underrepresentation of women's contribution in the war as well as to post-war nation-building is due to patriarchal society's aim to restrict women's active participation in the public arena. Tamar Mayer has rightly stated that “[d]espite its rhetoric of equality for all who partake in the ‘national project’ *nation* remains, like other feminized entities – emphatically, historically and globally – the property of men” (1). If nation, as Benedict Anderson argues, is “imagined as a community” that is characterised by “a deep, horizontal comradeship,” (7) then women, as the other half of the population sharing the common origin or shared characteristics, should be an integral part of this comradeship. Yet for women, these commonalities fail to pave the way for inclusion. In Yuval-Davis' view, “[t]he myth of common origin or shared blood/genes tends to construct the most exclusionary/homogenous visions of ‘the nation’” (“Nationalist Project” 11), and it is precisely for this reason that women remain outside the imagined community/nation. More often than not, women as active members of nation or as political actors are seen as an anomaly because of patriarchal hegemony. Ideological commitment to gender equality that is professed in society is hardly exercised in reality. Women are required to exhibit “accepted

feminine behavior” (Banerjee, “Gender and Nationalism” 168), so when they leave the threshold of the home and join the war as active combatants or later as active political actors, they, in fact, challenge societal ideas of femininity. Their projection of masculine traits threatens the men who see the female presence as “diluting” the resolute masculinity of the nation. Men fear that the “female political presence may challenge socially prescribed gender roles and hence weaken (read feminise) the image of the powerful (read masculine) nation” (Banerjee, “Gender and Nationalism” 169). It is precisely for this reason that the voices of the women who took active part in the nation-building have been silenced. The very fact that women’s active political participation challenges the masculine identity of the patriarchy is in itself reason enough to suppress their activism in nation-building.

Even the voices of those who were victims of mass rape are systematically and methodically erased from national history. Survivors of genocidal mass rape were considered sacrificial victims for the nation. Their sexuality, motherhood and identity were defined through state-sponsored welfare programmes by social workers, medical personnel, government officials, religious groups and others – not by women themselves (D’Costa, “Nationbuilding” 14). Even the rehabilitation of the *birangonas* is carried out with the aim to subdue the participation of women in nation-building. D’Costa propounds that

attitudes of and decisions taken by the social workers and medical staff in the rehabilitation centres similarly reflected patriarchal, traditional values about family, community norms and state policies, and they thus endorsed decisions to reintegrate women into society as soon as possible by keeping their trauma and ordeal a secret, contributing to the silencing in official documents and personal narratives. (“*Birangona: Bearing Witness*” 85)

The reason behind silencing the rape victims is to protect the honour of the nation. According to Banerjee, women symbolise national honour, thus any act (for example, rape) that defiles and violates women’s bodies becomes a political weapon aimed at destroying the enemy nation’s honour (“Gender and Nationalism” 168). Raping a woman’s body is thus equated with dishonouring the enemy’s property and honour. Hence, to defend the honour of the country and particularly, to safeguard Bengali masculine identity, Bangladesh “silence[d] its ‘own’ women” (Mohsin, “The History of Sexual Violence” 33). Another reason behind such suppression of the voices is the idea of creating a pure nation. Yuval-Davis alleges that women’s importance in nation-building is based on their reproductive roles (“Nationalist Projects” 12). Their centrality, as Mayer also contends, is based on women’s symbolic status, connected to their reproductive roles, as a representation of purity. Only pure and modest women can re-produce the pure nation; without purity in biological reproduction, the

nation clearly cannot survive (Mayer 7). This ideology of creating a nation without the stigma of impurity instigates the stakeholders of the nation to silence the voices of the rape victims.

Conclusion

Despite the constraints that limit women's engagement as combatants in the freedom of the country, women like Maya, Rehana, Sultana and Kona (Sohail's friend who took part in active combat) overcame all the hurdles to be part of the war and the nation-building process, only to be relegated to a subordinate status in the aftermath of the war. Even though, as D'Costa states, "[t]he Liberation War of Bangladesh was very much a story of women" ("*Birangona: Bearing Witness*" 76), in varied ways women's wartime experiences and struggles and most importantly, their contributions in the nation-building process have been pushed to the edge to institutionalise male monopoly on war. Saikia has rightly observed that a "politics of active national forgetting" is at work in official versions of Bangladeshi history (7). Maya's and Piya's contributions in war and the construction of Bangladesh have not warranted them proper rights and power in the socio-political arena of the country because the scripts in which these roles are embedded are written primarily by men, for men and about men, and women are, by design, supporting actors whose roles reflect masculinist notions of femininity and of "women's proper place" (Nagel 243). It is this very notion of "women's proper place" (Nagel 243) in the patriarchal worldview that relegated Maya to the private sphere of the home and childbearing. Because women's participation in the public domain challenges the prescribed gender identities, every attempt is made to confine women within their socially and culturally constructed identity. As literary representations of the lived experiences of women who participated in the war and nation-building, Maya's and Piya's narratives unveil the intentional silencing that is aimed at controlling and disempowering woman. Indeed, movements for national liberation are rarely extended to the autonomy and liberation of women (Moghadam 2). Even today women are marginalised ideologically and politically in the public and political world; very few women have been successful in crossing the structural confines of family and society and attaining decision making positions. Genuine revision of the national narratives that gives voice to women's contributions in war and nation-building, along with gender-sensitive reforms, will pave the way for women's empowerment and promote gender equality in public and political arenas.

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