Subaltern Resistance and Aporia in Shaheen Akhtar's *The Search*

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Abstract
This paper aims to examine the grassroot level resistance of the war heroines of Bangladesh, who endured ineffable atrocities during the Liberation War in 1971 as well as in post-conflict Bangladesh, as depicted in Shaheen Akhtar's *The Search*. The war heroines, often (mis)represented through passivity and victimisation by earlier scholars, writers, and activists, exhibited defiance in the face of continuous hurdles not only during the war but also in the post-war period, which remains notably unacknowledged and veiled. Hence, apart from examining their resistance, this paper attempts to shed light on the impetuses delineated in the novel, which despite the war heroines' disaffection and resistance, push them towards the realm of subalternity, evoking a sense of aporia. However, this paper contends that this sense of aporia is undercut at the end of the novel through the war heroines' rejection of the previous hegemonic social structure and venture to re-ground their life-world. To this end, the paper will incorporate recent accretions in the theoretical field of gendered subalternity, which focus on the narrative shift from subalternity to resistance, albeit the possible aporia followed by the struggle of subalterns.

Keywords
War heroines of Bangladesh, gendered subalternity, subaltern resistance, ethical responsibility, aporia in subaltern resistance

Introduction

Moving away from the reductionist approach of strict class division, the term "subaltern" acquired its theoretical underpinnings in Antonio Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks* (1947), where Gramsci used this term to denote the "[n]on-hegemonic groups or classes" (Hoare and Smith xiv), specifically the rural peasants of Southern Italy who lacked political or social consciousness. This term, since then has been extended to encompass a wide range of struggles among people in different social, cultural, and political positions despite its denotation as "a junior

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ranking officer in the British Army" (Morton 48). Particularly, this notion of subaltern was further developed by a cluster of historians who formed the Subaltern Studies Collective in the 1980s. Ranajit Guha, the pioneering figure of this collective, defined this term in his "Preface" as "a name for the general attribute of subordination in South Asian society whether this is expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender, and office or in any other way" (vii). Although Guha incorporated the notion of gender in this definition, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's excavation regarding gendered subalternity in her foundational essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988) primarily casts light on how women were doubly oppressed and silenced from national historiography.

This lack of speech and agency among the gendered subalterns becomes more severe with the inclusion of raped and sexually violated women in this discussion. Rape, which creates an "assault on a woman's underlying conditions of being" (Cahill 132), leads to a sense of loss of subjecthood, extending further complexities since victims themselves are unable to fathom and express their worldview through speech. Sometimes, even when they try to express themselves through different semiotics, that expression remains unintelligible to hegemonic social structures. They become the ultimate subalterns, as they are either misinterpreted or effaced from their own narrative, let alone the national historiography. Nonetheless, amidst such ambiguities, unintelligibility, misrepresentation, and silences, small-scale resistance might be evoked which needs to be examined minutely instead of solely reiterating their victimisation. Recent feminist scholarship has also shifted, with scholars now emphasising the resistance of these women instead of their victimised portrayal. Rajeswari Sundar Rajan believes that this shift of narrative can dismantle the patriarchal portrayal of the victims by:

> [r]epresenting the raped woman as one who becomes a subject through rape rather than one merely subjected to its violation; by structuring a post-rape narrative that traces her strategies of survival instead of a rape-centered narrative that privileges chastity and leads inexorably to "trials" to establish it; by locating the raped woman in structures of oppression other than heterosexual "romantic" relationships; by literalizing instead of mystifying the representations of rape; and finally, by counting the cost of rape for its victims in terms more complex than the extinction of female selfhood in death or silence. (Rajan 77)

Hence, it is necessary to inspect the victims' different semiotics that might represent their rebellious zeal, no matter how elusive and/or insignificant that attempt might seem on the surface. It is also the ethical responsibility of the representatives to avoid subsuming the victim's different semiotics within their

hegemonic understanding. However, more often than not, such semiotic differences cannot be deciphered and thereby, are misrepresented by the representatives. Thus, in a hegemonic social structure where these subalterns lack agency and the people who attempt to represent them re-present them, such resistance might fall back to subalternity. Analyzing Shaheen Akhtar's novel *The Search* (2011), this paper aims to look at this shifting narrative in which the victims resist hegemonic structures. Howbeit, reflecting on the ending of the novel, the paper argues that such aporia can be overcome provided that the victims refuse to comply with hegemonic discourses that keep them within the loop of subalternity and attempt to recreate a life-world for them.

The Search and Bangladesh's war heroines

Historical narratives of any war mostly celebrate the victorious men for their valour while women are identified through victimhood. The historiography of the Liberation War of Bangladesh is no exception in this case although after years of distorted representation and eventual amnesia regarding the lives and experiences of the raped women during the war and in post-war Bangladesh, a shift in this narrative could be observed. Nevertheless, chronicling an authentic representation of the raped women becomes a herculean task when historical narratives remain in flux depending on the political parties in power. In this regard, literary representation might be able to bring verisimilitude to the nuances of such alterations with the inclusion of marginalised voices, especially the voices of the doubly oppressed – the raped women, their struggles, and the way they navigate through life which the discourse of the dominant group of society tries to veil and erase. *The Search* is one such literary text that not only delineates this struggle of subaltern women but also elucidates the catalysts that push them back to subalternity, depicting an unstable political condition of Bangladesh which might eventually create a sense of doubt and despondency in readers' minds.

The source text *Talaash* is a war novel originally written in Bangla by Shaheen Akhtar in 2004. It was translated as *The Search* by Ella Dutta in 2011 The protagonist of this novel is Mariam who was sexually abused during the liberation war of Bangladesh. She was kept in army camps with other women where they would be gang raped almost every night for months. However, Akhtar does not end the novel with this victimised condition of Mariam and other raped women during the war; rather, she shows how this atrocity towards these women continues in various forms even after the war ends, and how they resist such atrocities and try to create their new subjecthood in a post-conflict country. Mariam, other raped women, and social workers of the rehabilitation centre are interviewed by Mukti, a researcher. Through structuring this novel in the form

of an interview, intertwining memory, and time-shift, Akhtar portrays how these women were hardly accepted within the community despite many attempts for their social rehabilitation programs being organised by the government. Although Mariam became independent and even helped another victim named Tuki to achieve financial freedom, she was continuously shamed and ostracised by everyone, including her family members. At the end, Mariam became skeptical of the objective and futility of the research project undertaken by Mukti and the demand for the trial of the collaborators. After deciding to disappear from the narrative of Mukti, in the last chapter, she, along with other incorruptible subalterns, travels to an imaginary setting, leaving behind the place that never accepted them.

Through exploring the historical events of Bangladesh during 1971 and afterwards, the gradual effacement of the raped women from socio-political and historical narratives becomes quite evident. Nayanika Mookherjee, in *The Spectral Wound: Sexual Violence, Public Memories, and the Bangladesh War of 1971* (2015), scrutinises this process of ostracisation. She also appreciates different measures initially taken by the government for the social inclusion of the raped women despite limitations of implementing those actions. For example, the new Bangladeshi government publicly recognised the raped women as "war heroines" on the sixth day of victory in 1971, which she considers an "internationally unprecedented" (xv) move. Furthermore, establishing rehabilitation programs in 1972, arranging marriages, and providing various job opportunities for the social inclusion of these women were also notable steps taken by the government. Nevertheless, she asserts that the gradual silence of the Bangladeshi press and government about war heroines from 1973 to 1990 cannot be disregarded. Especially, when military rule marked its entrance in 1975, the victims started to disappear further from the public sphere. The rehabilitation centre was vandalised. On top of that, the repealing of the Collaborator's Act on December 31, 1975, and releasing all collaborators from prison as well as inviting other collaborators who left the country after the war to Bangladesh with full citizenship, paved the way for such marginalisation of war heroines to a greater extent.

There was also a paucity of representation of war heroines in the field of literature and culture as Fayeza Hasanat posits, "Up until the late 1990s, the literary culture either presented a passive and victimized view of the *birangonas* or chose to put them aside, as nation's 'unspeakable past' – the ultimate subaltern" (17). However, Mookherjee argues that even in the 1990s, there was this tendency to homogenise and misrepresent war heroines, as she observes that "the standardized passivity in birangona portraiture also continued in human rights

reenactments" during that time (215). Akhtar situates her novel in this unstable socio-political context of Bangladesh, mostly from the 1970s to the late 1990s, where she mirrors the social, political, and ethical complexities faced by the raped women during the war and post-war condition of Bangladesh.

Unfortunately, *The Search* has not received ample recognition in the Bangladeshi literary canon, let alone world literature. There is also a scarcity of significant research on its portrayal of war heroines. Research works conducted on this novel mostly incorporate a feminist lens to discuss how this novel accentuates the voicelessness of these raped women. In this respect, Firdous Azim's paper titled "The Forgotten Women of 1971: Bangladesh's Failure to Remember Rape Victims of the Liberation War" can be mentioned as she talks about "the limits of speech and representation" that this novel delineates (41). This delineation emphasises that such limitation of representation occurs as identities and recountings become ambiguous due to continuous violence. Although Azim believes that "this is a story of a woman's desire for a firm social and sexual position" (48), Mariam and other war heroines' resilience and grassroot level resistance through different semiotics in the face of constant atrocity and obstruction get overlooked in her critique of these characters and narratives as uncertain and ambiguous. Unlike Azim, who at least puts forward the complexities of representing war heroines and their experiences, Chaity Das, in her excavation of the buried tongues in the war of 1971, refers to this novel by only focusing on the victimisation of the war heroines in the patriarchal structure of the country. She considers it a "bleak novel, severely unlike the heroic narratives of Anisul Hoque and Selina Hossain" (22). Therefore, amidst this limited research work, the small-scale resistance of the war heroines delineated in this novel remains in the background while their subalternity through various social and political constructions gets highlighted, which this paper regards as a gap that needs to be addressed. As a matter of fact, Shaheen Akhtar mentions in one of her interviews that she was deeply influenced by not only the deceptions that these war heroines faced but also by their "anger and frustration" at this behavior (Akhtar 2007). This anger and frustration can be vividly observed through the defiance of Mariam and other war heroines in this novel. Even though that resistance might not appear heroic as Chaity Das mentions, it is not negligible. The probability of their falling back to subalternity does not occur due to their timidity or ambiguity. They defy the imposed distorted narratives and fight against oppressive forces till the end. Akhtar indeed keeps room for a hopeful proposition regarding their resistance, as will be elaborated in the final section of this paper.

War heroines' struggle against hegemonic social structures

Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak?" points out how "sati," as a subaltern, remains unheard of in two counter-positional discourses of white men saving "brown women from brown men" and "the woman actually wanted to die" (297). This widely misunderstood postulation becomes more perspicuous in her later interview with Landry and Maclean. She clarifies that while talking about the speech of the subalterns, she was referring to the concept of speech act as a "transaction between the speaker and the listener" (289) where both parties remain equally involved. Unfortunately, even if the subalterns speak and resist, their speech and resistance remain unheard of and unacknowledged in this transaction, leading to misrepresentation and consequent erasure.

Despite this misrepresentation and erasure, as Rajan propounds, the attempt to identify different semiotics of grassroot-level resistance that bring a narrative shift from victims' passivity to their struggle and survival strategies is necessary. In this regard, understanding Spivak's concept of ethical responsibility is also essential since she emphasises the role of the representatives in understanding and listening to the voices of the marginalised groups while representing them. "Responsibility," she defines, is "when we engage profoundly with one person" and "the responses come from both sides" ("Translator's Preface" 269-70). That is, the conversation flows spontaneously between the interlocutors when a responsible respondent, who is genuinely trying to understand the victim, is involved. Additionally, in such responsible engagement, instead of subsuming the victim within any hegemonic discourse, the respondent cognises and acknowledges the differences between them. In Spivak's words, "when the philosopher – or anyone – tries and tries to explain and reveal, and the respondent tries and tries to receive the explanation and the revelation, that the something that must of necessity not go through is the secret and changeable 'essence' of that exchange" ("Responsibility" 20). In other words, ethical responsibility arises from the encounter between the victim and the respondent, as the latter attempts to empathise, understand, and respect the differences, or, to quote Spivak, the "secret and the changeable 'essence' of that exchange" (20).

Rajan's assertion that raped women and their representation cannot and should not be described in a linear manner because their lives do not always end in death or silence, is vividly reflected in this novel. The war heroines' affliction, heterogeneous ways of survival, and their grassroot level resistance achieve a nuanced portrayal here. Akhtar does not fetish their rape scene or raped body. Nor does she show that they are entirely shunned by their family members or society. She also does not depict them homogenously attaining respect and status in the family and society. Rather, she represents these war heroines' struggle in a

heterogeneously convoluted manner, focusing on their loss of selfhood and agency, and their attempt to rebuild selfhood and agency against the prevalent constructed narratives of the state, emphasising their rebellious zeal against the continuous oppression, distortion, and marginalisation. This depiction of war heroines' resistance in the novel also seems to subtly reflect Akhtar's sense of ethical responsibility, as she plays with their different semiotics to covertly and/or overtly subvert the social constructions prevailing among the people in power, the masses, and even the scholars and activists who in their attempt to represent the voices of war heroines, misrepresent or subsume those voices within the hegemonic discourse. Having a first-hand experience of interviewing the war heroines herself earlier, she seems to critique the misrepresentation of the activists while simultaneously shouldering the ethical responsibility to represent them as authentically as possible.

Now, the rupture in identity and struggle of the protagonist Mariam and other war heroines started in army camps, as they remained in continuous horrendous physical and emotional torture there for months. Despite that inhuman physical and emotional torture, the novel shows that many of them did not give in to despondency; rather, they remained alive and dreamt of fighting against this atrocity in various ways. This tenacity is apparent in Anuradha's "willpower" to "survive" and her desire for the "future generations to know and remember their torture and oppression, and remember too who had oppressed them and why" (Akhtar 117), or in Shobha Rani's "foetus in her womb that grew like swelling pumpkins" being "an instance of the failure of the Pakistani project of exterminating Hindus" (Akhtar 136). Furthermore, the prevalent narrative of the war heroines' suicide in these rape camps also appears in this novel when Mukti later interviews Mariam and reiterates that most women in their situation committed suicide, especially if they had a dupatta or saree and a hook on the ceiling. However, as Mariam replies that she never thought of committing suicide despite having a ceiling fan and long dupatta, Mukti is dissatisfied. Later, when Mariam informs that after some days their torn rags were collected by a sweeper, Mukti seems to be rather content for it aligns with the dominant recounting associated with war heroines:

> Mukti breathes a sigh of relief. The long, large dupatta does not correspond with the information in the books…. Suicide was scripted for such a woman after having lost her chastity. The nation, at least, had nurtured such a wish. In such a scenario, the sweeper taking away Mariam's clothes, not only released Mariam from her duty of committing suicide but also granted Mukti a measure of relief. (Akhtar 90)

Here, through incorporating this narrative of suicide in Mukti's interview, Akhtar seems to be critiquing the researchers and activists who mostly focus on the victimised condition of the raped women and/or impose stereotypical narratives upon them to attach more credibility to their research, overlooking the lived experiences, strength, and resistance amidst their hesitant, ambivalent, and somewhat blurred memories. Although analyzing the interview, Azim asserts that such ambiguities of position and recounting lead to the difficulty of representability in artistic and historical renderings since social workers and researchers themselves become befuddled, Akhtar's depiction of the researcher's method and motif of conducting the interview, who "sounds like a lawyer interrogating raped woman" (Akhtar 198), reflects Mukti's lack of empathy and sincerity instead of the war heroines' inability to express themselves. There were indeed cases of suicide in rape camps; yet, homogenising the experience of all war heroines without minute investigation needs to be rebutted. It is also important to note that Mariam does not give in to the pressure of Mukti's inquiries; rather, she refutes the prevalent narrative if it belies her experience, which occurs time and again throughout the novel.

It is no wonder then that the struggle of these raped women does not end as the war ends. On the contrary, their struggle increases in post-war Bangladesh as they must fight against the people of their own country to establish their truth in the face of continuous epistemic violence. Although after the war they achieve a new identity as war heroines, which is supposed to be a respectful title bestowed for their sacrifice and courage, this nomenclature diminishes their subjecthood and agency even further to the point that the title feels like a "venomous insect or some communicable disease. As if its touch will cause deadly sores, as if limbs will rot and fall off" (Akhtar 195). They are now easy to locate, despise, and shun.

Consequently, they are hardly accepted by their families. However, Akhtar depicts this family relationship with its intricate dimensions instead of reiterating the linear, prevalent discourse surrounding their social wound. On the one hand, she indeed shows a family like Tuki's, where her parents try to murder her by poisoning. On the other hand, she also portrays Mariam's family, who take her back from the rehabilitation centre only to marry her off to the first suitor they find even though they know he is not suitable for their daughter. Mariam resists and leaves that place. After a while, her family only accepts her when they hear about her marriage. That marriage does not last and she again loses the acceptance she had found from her family members. At that moment, interestingly, Mariam's mother comes forward to help her survive independently in Dhaka by offering shelter and starting a joint tailoring business although she

eventually abandons Mariam. Nonetheless, this incorporation of family within the lives of war heroines is significant since Akhtar illustrates the difficult process and struggle of both family members and their daughters to come to terms with their new identity, as they oscillate between love and socially normative practices. This narrative by Akhtar seems to gainsay the prevailing recounting of family's disowning their raped daughters. Besides, the dominant narrative regarding the social wound of war heroines, which accentuates their victimisation, was to some extent deliberately constructed. Mookherjee elaborately discusses this narrative of the passivity of raped women in visual imagery and human rights enactments. Particularly, her conversation with the director of the play *Shamuk Bash* (Life of a Snail [1998]), a stage dramatisation of Neelima Ibrahim's non-fiction compiling the testimonies of seven war heroines titled *Ami Birangona Bolchi* (This is the Birangona Speaking [1994]), reflects on the manipulated narrative of these raped women's social wound and the reasoning behind such a distorted narrative. In Ibrahim's delineation, the war heroines, Tara and Reena, ultimately find contentment in some measure. Conversely, in the stage dramatisation, only their misfortune is mentioned and highlighted. Mookherjee questions this narrative and receives the following answer:

> They explained that they did not want to show birangonas living normal lives. To raise awareness about the trauma of war heroines, they said, the audience should not feel that the birangonas are living well. They also pointed out that in most literary accounts birangonas are not accepted back into their families. Here the directors are following the prevalent textual narratives that the birangona is marked by her social wound, that she is not accepted within her familial and kinship structure. (Mookherjee 211-212)

In other words, the focus on their victimisation is deliberately given to "raise awareness" and follow "the prevalent textual narratives" rather than expressing their truths. Shaheen Akhtar sketches her protagonist's multiplex equation with the family against such a distorted narrative prevalent in the hegemonic discourse. There indeed might be social wounds of the war heroines, but, those wounds are heterogeneously complex and dynamic.

After losing the support and acceptance of her family members, Mariam starts searching for a job in Dhaka to survive. In this crucial episode, Akhtar exposes the political and economic corruption in the post-war country through a character like Abed, Mariam's former lover, who works for the people he fought against in 1971. Simultaneously, she subverts the socially constructed helpless identity of war heroines, who unlike Abed, do not compromise or become

opportunistic, rather ask for their rights as war heroines. Mariam is seen rightfully demanding a job from Abed; nevertheless, Abed is shocked as he thinks:

> Birangana connoted a helpless, oppressed woman, whom people despised under the cover of pity. How had she acquired such courage that she's been able to come to her ex-lover not to plead for his love, but to demand a job? (Akhtar 224)

This time, by playing with the word "war heroine," Akhtar writes against the prevalent schema regarding war heroines' titles. As already mentioned, this nomenclature pushes the victims to further subalternity. Abed also points out that the socially constructed picture of them is that they are "helpless, oppressed women." Therefore, they should not raise their voice, let alone express their agency. However, the denotative meaning of this title is 'courageous woman.' Mariam, by raising her voice and showing agency with "such courage," evokes the true sense of the title and creates a rupture in the socially normative portrayal of the helpless identity of the war heroines, expressing her defiance. This is another of such numerous examples of social struggle depicted in the novel that the war heroines have to face and resist invariably to regain their subjectivity and agency.

Eventually, Mariam does not have her family beside her; yet, she survives on her own, creating a rupture in the dominant narrative that marginalises the war heroines and portrays them as helpless, passive victims. She also decides to withdraw from the interview with Murkti at the end of the novel. Despite Akhtar's portrayal of a heterogeneous picture of the war heroines and their resistance, the pessimistic post-war situation in Bangladesh, as reflected in this novel, cannot be disregarded. Although characters like Mariam and Tuki survive because of their resilience, a brilliant war heroine like Anuradha, who dreamt of bearing testimony and had the potential to become a renowned writer, becomes a prostitute and does not even receive a proper burial after her death in the independent country. Besides, as their struggle for identity increases, collaborators and corrupted people like Abed gradually start occupying powerful positions, excluding the war heroines and their lived experiences from social structures even further. Furthermore, the representatives also write narratives aligning with the hegemonic discourse surrounding the war heroines, as can be observed in Mukti's case. This bleak reality generates an aporetic condition. Does their struggle have a positive outcome, or does it push them back to marginalisation and gradual evanescence?

Resistance or aporia: Mariam's withdrawal from the project

Aporia, derived from early Greek philosophy, is "a point of impasse where there is puzzlement or perplexity about how to proceed" (Palmer 9). Socrates

incorporated it in his dialogic method to delve into the deeper understanding of philosophical queries where he "brings his interlocutors to the point where they no longer know what to say" (Palmer 9). This aporetic sense is created to show the limitations of the interlocutors' knowledge and thereby seek true understanding of those philosophical inquiries. This concept has also been used in the field of deconstruction to indicate a sense of undecidability or contradiction present in philosophical concepts and texts. Derrida mentions it as a "nonpassage," "paralyzing" human beings "before a door, a threshold, a border, a line, or simply the edge or the approach of the other" (12). Unlike ancient Greek philosophers, Derrida suggests that aporia cannot be escaped by trying to solve the contradiction since "in this place of aporia, there is no longer any problem" (12). That is, this embedded contradiction in philosophical concepts and texts is not a problem to be solved, but a condition that human beings must accept and live with.

Spivak includes this notion of aporia while theorising gendered subalternity in "Can the Subaltern Speak?". Through the example of sati, she illustrates how "a violent aporia between her subject and object status" (306) emerges, and her voice and agency disappear while being represented in the counter-positional discourses. Later, in "Translator's Preface and Afterword to Mahasweta Devi, Imaginary Maps," she also contends that a subaltern can overcome such a condition, progressing towards the position of an organic intellectual when s/he "gets into the structure of responsible (responding and being responded to) resistance" (271). This again resonates with her concepts of speech act theory and ethical responsibility that focus on the necessity of an empathetic and reciprocal interlocution between the speaker and the respondent. Vahabzadeh, while partially agreeing with Spivak's speech act theory to overcome subalternity, critiques her incorporation of hegemony, which seemingly works "more as dominance and coercion than consent" (105) in her theorisation. However, responsible resistance cannot be materialised if the hegemonic structure of a society is designed to exclude the worldview of the subalterns. In this regard, he incorporates Gramscian notion of hegemony, postulating that "hegemony involves a re-grounding of everyday experience and common sense in the epistemic framework of the hegemonic class or group" (105). In other words, hegemony, which requires domination through consent for its sustenance, by definition, needs to incorporate the life-world of the other. If the present hegemonic worldview fails to do so, it must be reformed to include their lived experiences. That is how this aporetic condition of subalternity can be overcome. Vahabzadeh states:

> Subalternity is overcome through a creative act, an act of decision, which attests to the attempt at re-grounding one's life-world. The re-grounding could lead to the hegemonization of the subaltern-turned-subject. But it also could potentially lead to the emergence of a new hegemonic subject. (Vahabzadeh 110).

Hence, the hegemonic social structure needs to be reshaped to include the lived experiences and subjectivity of marginalised groups. This, in turn, might lead them back to the previous life-world of hegemonisation. Nevertheless, it might lead towards new subjecthood as well.

As mentioned in the previous section, despite the war heroines' continuous resistance, they are pushed towards further subalternity. After the war, the then president's attempt to promote social rehabilitation centre and different projects for war heroines was hardly accepted by the masses and people in power in different sectors. This notion is reflected through characters such as Abed, who threatens Mariam with a false allegation of being a pseudo-war heroine when she rightfully seeks a job, or Golam Mostofa, a collaborator during the war, who searches for opportunities to change sides after the Liberation War and marries off his mentally challenged son Saju to Mariam solely because he could be "transformed from a Pakistani agent to a Bengali patriot" (Akhtar 218). Under such circumstances, whatever decision Mariam takes will hardly reflect her agency. There is definitely a defiant nature in her when she asks for a job. However, the corrupt people in power deny her agency, forcing her to lose selfhood. The other option she chooses to survive in this misogynous world of corruption and exertion of power is to get married, which, albeit reflective of her agency, is a byproduct of patriarchal conditioning in her case. Consequently, the identity she proudly wants to embrace as a war heroine gets diminished after marriage, and reverts to the identity of a whore in the eyes of her husband.

Although Mariam's life is not representative of the life of all war heroines, it strategically essentialises the complexity that the raped women had to face despite their resistance and the then president Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's (also titled as *Bangabandhu*) different initiatives for their social inclusion. The voices of war heroines were still restrained during his lifetime. After his death, the situation deteriorated further as an elderly social worker tells Mukti, the researcher:

> With Bangabandhu's assassination, the rehabilitation centre was closed down…. The women were thrown out as if a brothel was being shut down…. People were being arrested right and left.... The Birangans became baranganas, prostitutes…. Those who had fallen into the clutches of traffickers and had gone abroad were lost forever. Some had committed suicide. (Akhtar 301-302)

Akhtar concisely narrates the rapidly changing social and political conditions of war heroines through these lines uttered by a social worker. Though the war heroines depicted in this novel choose to continue living and resisting, their lack of agency is undeniable as the very social system works as an impediment to their inclusion. In other words, the prevalent hegemonic worldview itself works as a force to keep their subalternity in check. At this point, this worldview resonates with the notion of aporia, where choosing any option between counter-positional discourses reflects the lack of agency of the subalterns as the social structure is constructed to exclude their life-world.

Now, Mariam's withdrawal from the research project, which is the most significant episode for this section, can be read in two ways. It has already been established that Mariam does not shy away from defying the narrative imposed by people in power, including the activists and researchers, who while supposedly taking the ethical responsibility for responsible resistance, push them towards further subalternity. Consequently, she realises the futile outcome of the research project of Mukti and decides to abstain from it. This realisation triggers as Mariam learns about the death and degraded burial of Anuradha alias Radharani. Since she became a prostitute after the war, she could not receive a proper burial, and her body was thrown into a river. Despite Mariam's continuous experience of oppression in post-war Bangladesh, this incident works as the final nail in the coffin for her to become skeptical regarding any research project on war heroines or the trial of war criminals that cannot protect and/or acknowledge a war heroine like Anuradha. She starts questioning the present hegemonic worldview and realises the futility of participating in the research project of Mukti:

> The business about Anuradha has disoriented her. Life is stranger than film and theatre. Should she believe or not? If she believes, then what will happen to the ground beneath her feet? In a country where a Birangana couldn't even get a decent burial, there was going to be a trial for war crimes? She was wrong in letting Mukti record her statements for the last two years. (Akhtar 352)

After this realisation, she is seen making frequent visits to Daulatdia until she sets her journey to an unknown place with Tuki who also seems to have no wish to remain in this "sinful world" (Akhtar 355). Akhtar does not say further where she goes leaving behind this worldview. The last chapter of this novel, which shows that Mariam and other subaltern characters of the Liberation War finally meet in an imaginary land where they are poignantly happy to see one another, is concocted by Mukti. At this point, the omniscient narrator feels empathetic to Mukti as well, as her years of hard work "conducted with care" (Akhtar 356) (which has been questioned by various characters in the novel till this chapter) is

left midway by Mariam. On a surface level, this incident literally shows how war heroines as subalterns are expunged from the national historiography. Although it is their choice not to participate in the discourse, this agency simultaneously negates their presence. However, on a deeper level, it can also be read as the war heroines' attempt to reground a new hegemonic worldview, rejecting the previous life-world which was designed to marginalise them. Akhtar rather keeps this ending hanging since she explicitly does not mention whether the war heroines overcome their subalternity or fall back to hegemonisation in this new life-world. The last chapter, which is concocted by Mukti, at least keeps space for optimism, where all oppressed subalterns happily meet one another looking at their previous land, with a sense of melancholy. What is significant in both cases (Mukti's made-up story and Mariam's leaving for an unknown place) is that Mariam rejects the previous hegemonic social structure and decides to act against it. Therefore, rather than depicting an aporetic situation, Akhtar seems to have kept the ending symbolically open where these subalterns have taken the initiative to form a new hegemonic worldview with futural possibilities of success or failure. Despite Akhtar's delineation of stagnating surroundings, this realisation of Mariam, her rejection of the previous world order, and attempt to reground new subjecthood for war heroines, as this paper reads, is a translucent sign of resistance which might pave the way for Mariam to become an organic intellectual. The title, *The Search*, thereby, might be a symbolic representation of their search for potentiating a new hegemony where they can retain their subjecthood.

Conclusion

The Search foregrounds the history of the raped women of the 1971 war of independence, which lacks proper representation in the national historiography of Bangladesh. Fiction, therefore, can sometimes mirror the nuances of underrepresented voice, struggle, and rebellion more accurately than the historical narrative of a country. Even the most convoluted scene at the end of the novel, where Mariam may lose her voice in national historiography, appears with equivocal nuances, as readers question whether to interpret it as expressive of her agency or further subalternity. Nonetheless, it is essential to note that instead of being completely obliterated, this aporia is at least chronicled through the fictional representation, and as the paper has posited, should be read as an expression of her resistance for her attempt to reject the previous world order to create a new one.

In this regard, this paper, in no way, repudiates the idea that there were indeed many raped women who lacked the courage or medium to raise their

voices and/or committed suicide or died due to the inhumane physical and mental torture faced in army camps or post-war Bangladesh. However, this portrayal was so repeatedly emphasised that it became a powerful discourse deliberately designed to veil and erase war heroines from national historiography. It is no wonder then, that amidst recent political instability in Bangladesh, powerful individuals are once again distorting and undermining the violence that happened to the large number of women during the Liberation War. Ergo, this paper has attempted to bring the voices of this small-scale, underrepresented resistance of the war heroines to the foreground. No matter how much misrepresentation in the hegemonic discourse and constant obstacles from the establishment veil their defiance, resistance should continue from their end since ethically inclined authors and their fictional representation might bring verisimilitude to the subaltern resistance with its intricate complexities and dimensions.

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