



Muktijuddho Film as Disruptive Archive, Filmmaker as Witness

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Yes, I have heard of the term Birangona. But who does it refer to? Birangona is someone who has been taken away and berthed with Pakistanis. (Elderly male community member)

Birangona has to be married to Bir or she herself must be courageous. If she were brave, could she have been raped? She was raped because she was not a birangona. (Roma Choudhury)

If women get raped, it is they who become pregnant. They are living proof (not the men) of the rape; the scar is on their body. Men bear no proof. (Roma Choudhury)

I have put her on a pedestal, haven't I? (Husband of Ronjita Mondol)

Accounts of the Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971 and its aftermath are shaped by competing investments in memory and political projects of nation-building. In South Asia, the war is frequently cast as an "Indo-Pak" war, where the role of Indian intervention is seen as both decisive and heroic. Other accounts cast it as a "secession" and a betrayal by East Pakistan of West Pakistan. In the latter view East Pakistan presumably divested from an Islamic identity to embrace its more Hinduised culture (D'Costa 2011: 54). In 1947, an arbitrary line was carved through the



region separating the Muslim majority east from the Hindu majority west despite shared culture, language and history. The cruel politics of dividing Bengal produced a racially tinted discourse, wherein ethnic Bengalis of the east were seen as inferior to the Punjabis of the western wing of Pakistan. The ensuing struggle is remembered in Bangladesh as a glorious one that brought freedom to its oppressed peoples through revolution.

Yet official figures suggest staggering loss and sacrifice: up to three million died. Moreover, sexual violence against women was deployed as an organised tool to subdue the Bengali population. While women's roles have not been entirely ignored in Bangladeshi historiography, they are cast within an honour-shame-stigma complex, and alternatively subjected to 'authorial cooptations' (Fitzsimons-Quail 2015: 27). Against these reductive narratives, which van Schendel (2015: 5) calls part of a more nuanced and analytical second-generation historiography, Saikia (2012: 4f.) examines narratives of women who experienced violence by Pakistani, Bengali, Bihari, and Indian men spanning the pro- and anti-liberation forces. Illuminating the multiple wars within 1971, she writes the agency of diverse women's roles during and after the war back into the national history.

While the official Bangladeshi narrative focuses on a singular story of Bengali victimhood and Pakistani oppression, Saikia suggests that trauma and violence are not an exclusively Bengali experience. Pogroms were perpetrated by Bangladeshis/Bengalis in East Pakistan/Bangladesh against the minority Bihari population—non-Bengali, Urdu speaking migrants from India whose allegiance was to West Pakistan. Ordinary people committed atrocities to the extent that victims and perpetrators are not so clearly distinguishable (ibid.: 18). In the absence of official documents, scholars have turned to oral histories, film and literary texts, yet these also engage in a kind of erasure/suppression of women. Saikia establishes connections in these materials between the Bengali women, land, and nation, whereby rape of Bengali women comes to stand in for the rape of Bangladesh.

The Birangona was an honorific bestowed upon women survivors of sexual violence by the newly established Bangladesh government in the aftermath of war. Yet the Birangona narratives that exist are manipulated by various actors and are even stigmatised to denote loss of honour and likened to prostitutes (ibid.: 56). Additionally, posits Saikia, '[B]irangonas, although projected as female heroes, are also viewed as being complicit in the crime of rape' (ibid.: 58). This sort of cooptation and epistemic silence, according to Saikia, is instrumental to the production of official histories in



the service of nation-making. The Muktijuddho cinema genre, and particularly women-centred films, both reify, and sometimes subvert, as well as allude to an alternative reading of Bengali, Birangona subjectivity. Subsequently, these filmic narratives gesture towards a (re)imagining of agency, freedom, and justice as well as feminist knowledge-making.

Documenting trauma

In writing about the narration of "crisis" in cinema, Hesford and Kozol (2001: 4) ask: why should such a genre even evoke criticism, lest it run the risk of lessening the horrors that it purports to 'accurately and compellingly depict'? They continue, 'How, to put it most bluntly, do you critique a documentary about genocide and state-sanctioned rape that appears to offer a true depiction of this horror?' Like Hesford and Kozol, I, too, am invested in the pedagogical value of making visible the narrative and filmic construction of memorialising projects to illuminate the 'meaning-making gaze of the literary critic, film critic, and other cultural workers' (ibid.: 9). Following their lead, I argue that 'cultural representations of the "real" compete with interests in the interstices of power, authority and resistance' (ibid.: 2). Even justice-driven projects—such as the films I examine—must be critically read without diminishing their importance. Yet simultaneously, they must also be read for their historical value for marginalised groups to resist dominant narratives of their own experiences of victimisation. However, as Hesford and Kozol urge, 'authenticity cannot secure an absolutely privileged position for either dominance or resistance' (ibid.: 3). An examination of how cultural forms and material conditions interconnect in producing notions of voice and justice is critical in struggles for legitimacy and recognition.



Film poster, *The poison thorn*.

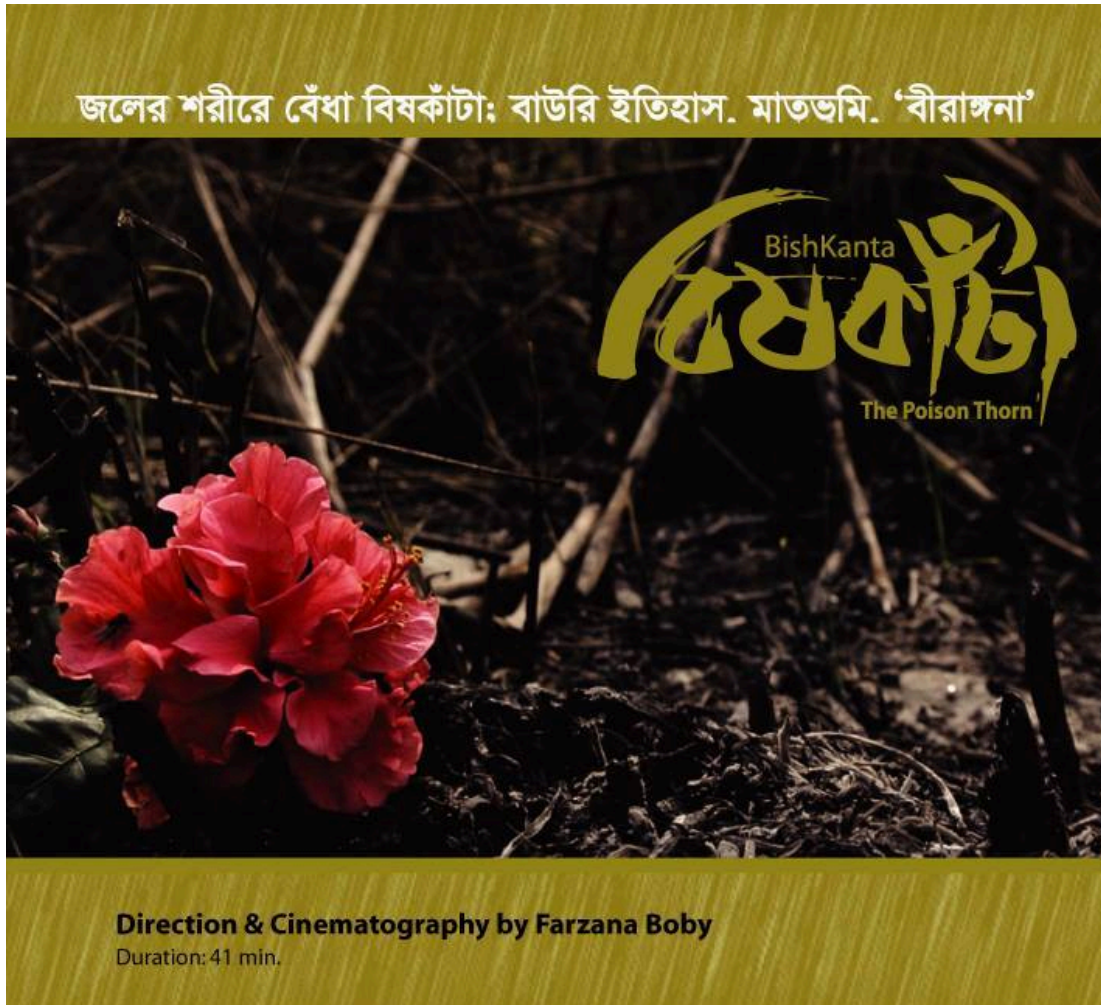


Figure 1, source: Farzana Boby.



Film poster, *Rising silence*.



Figure 2, source: Leesa Gazi.



Two nondominant documentaries—Leesa Gazi's *Rising silence* (2018) and Farzana Bobby's *The poison thorn* (2015)—contribute, reify, and disrupt a Muktijuddho gender ideology.¹ Part of a growing genre of cultural texts and productions, they offer gendered histories which complicate the "glorious war" narrative.² They recuperate more nuanced tellings by focusing primarily on marginalised stories of women during the birth of a nation. Critical feminist literature on cultural productions defy a masculinist nationalist reading to recover submerged histories of women—arguably, the goal of both films. Drawing on transnational feminist theorising around nationalism and war, memorialisation projects, and visual culture as a critical mode of human rights knowledge production, I explore how these two contemporary films illuminate submerged histories and contribute to what MacManus (2020: 18) calls a 'disruptive archive' of anti-hegemonic nationalist history, even while at times still perpetuating the women-shame-stigma complex.

Nationalist politics and a transnational feminist aesthetic simultaneously underpin the goal of such feminist recovery projects. I discuss the filmmakers'—both feminist and cultural activists—assumptions regarding women's experiences and whether these films reinscribe an assigned role for women in nation-building or allow a recognition of alternate modalities of being (Weheliye 2014: 15). Critical questions guide this analysis: to what extent do these films defy and disrupt an extant masculinist statist rhetoric? In what ways do they reify symbolic roles of women within a nationalist struggle, and to what extent are these roles subverted, fleshed out, reimagined? What are the epistemological and political implications of narrating submerged histories of women survivors of sexual violence? Whom and what do they serve within the broader questions of gender violence and gender justice?

Necropolitics and gendered dehumanisation

These two films recover submerged histories of women, of gendered oppression, violence, and resistance, with particular attention to narrative. A feminist cultural studies approach highlights the processes by which cultural producers represent narrative tensions and gaps. Feminist critic Jean Franco, who studies state-engineered mass atrocities in Latin America, writes that cultural texts, like 'faded photographs, fragmented testimonies, exhumed bodies, harvests of bones', leave long-lasting memory traces that can be excavated for collective healing and memorialisation (2013: 11). The harvests appear in literary forms, oral histories, embodied expressions, and visual cultural texts that exhume buried memories of gendered, state-



sponsored violence. Oral historians argue that this not only recovers otherwise marginalised voices but also constructs political subjectivities, consciousness, and collective identity—particularly of those in the margins. Knowledge produced through this mediated story-telling contributes to what MacManus terms a 'disruptive archive, a dissident feminist archive that counters repressive state, military, and even masculinist activist narratives' (2020: 19). Moreover, this alternative feminist epistemology often signals how trauma informs modes of narration and how loss is integral to knowledge, though borne out of trauma, that is never fully recoverable. While constructing these disruptive archives, women can transform dehumanising, violent memories of repression into politicised projects that seek what Brown terms 'comprehensive justice' for crimes of the state. These projects then have the dual goal of knowledge production and social justice (2004: 453).

In *Rising silence*, Gazi sits side by side in a paddy field with Shurjyo Begum, a Birangona³ woman from Sirajganj, as the latter narrates her brutal experiences of rape and torture from 1971. Shurjyo Begum says, 'When I lie down I see the army coming... monsters...' and her voice trails off. She looks out at the horizon and says, 'I can still see them coming.' A haunting moment in the film, this particular segment evokes for the viewer not only the fragmented memories of a survivor of violence and the embodied knowledge borne out of it, but also a kind of release and solidarity that is hinted at by the sharing of that knowledge with the filmmaker and the viewer. It is a gesture towards politicising the 'combed over' (Mookherjee 2015: 23) narratives of women toward creating a more just reckoning of the past.

Together, these films reveal the specificities of the kind of subjectivity and knowledge borne out of trauma that are created in a context of compromised living. According to philosopher and political theorist Mbembe, biopolitics strip the conditions of certain populations to a state of 'bare life,' and necropolitics, a state where the threat of death becomes the technique of governance (2003: 12). 'Bare life' thus is premised on an overarching threat of death, where power lies in determining who can live in what conditions and who ought to die. This right to determine life-and-death conditions is what Mbembe defines as the sovereignty and the politics prevailing in war.

Dominant feminist theories of nationalism have not adequately accounted for a necropolitical framework; nor has the Foucauldian analysis of biopower and critiques of necropower ensured a gendered interpretation



of those power dynamics. Scholars such as MacManus (2020) and Wright (2011) expand on this by teasing out the vulnerabilities of a gendered dehumanisation process that undergirds the bio- and necropolitics of the state. Through audiovisual and cultural texts, Wright and MacManus expose how this understanding, while vitally important to show the ways in which power operates, lacks both a gendered and racial lens. Furthermore, Weheliye suggests a 'recalibration' of the bare life and biopower discourses to shed light on hierarchies of 'racialized, gendered, sexualized, economized, and nationalized social existence,' that better conceptualise the dominion of modern politics (2014: 1). Weheliye asserts that the framework of the bare life discourse fails to recognise 'alternative modes of life alongside the violence, subjection, exploitation, and racialisation that define the modern human' (ibid.: 1f.). I believe this expansion is critical to understanding the ways in which both *Rising silence* and *The poison thorn* render visible the conditions of life and subjecthood of Birangona women.

Both films illuminate the racialised and gendered dehumanisation processes that construct the personhoods of Bengali men and women vis-à-vis West Pakistani personhood. This condition of compromised life is evident when Halima Khatun, survivor of war, tells filmmaker Bobby, 'I left home because of my mother. She did not support me or care for me. Once I tried to hang myself, another time I took poison. My war has not stopped. I continue fighting.' Birangona Halima Khatun continues, 'I still see them when I fall asleep. So I wake up screaming. I have been screaming for the last 40 years.' The carceral politics of the state are evident in the particular violence unleashed by the Pakistani military—killing men, raping women. The assignation of inferior racialised characteristics to Bengali men deemed them smaller, darker in comparison to the presumed racially evolved masculinity of West Pakistani-Punjabi soldiers. Rape was used as a tactic of war to both humiliate East Pakistani society but also to impregnate and thereby create a more docile population to control. Continuing gender differentiation is evident in the post-war titles bestowed to men (Bir Muktijoddha) and women (Birangona) by the new Bangladeshi state. The differential recognition of wartime heroism is also evident in the memorialisation of Muktijoddhas as martyrs with the erection of statues and structures, while only as recently as 2015 were Birangonas granted state-sanctioned stipends and recognition as freedom fighters (Gazi).

This layered dehumanisation process is laid out in Wright's gender violence work regarding femicide in the city of Juarez, Mexico and it is a useful lens through which to explicate gendered dehumanisation process



during war. Wright identifies a violent gendering of space that justifies the violence and death suffered by both men and women, with different rationales for each. Wright argues that government officials render women who 'walk the streets' as disreputable and unworthy, so that their murders are legitimised as a form of cleansing (2011: 711). The men who are killed in drug violence are also rendered valueless and therefore expendable. The role of gender undergirds the violence—these deaths provide the 'raw material for politics' against the so-called drug war (ibid.: 713). MacManus (2020: 65) describes violence used against women political resisters in the "Dirty War" in Mexico and Argentina, where they were subjected to sexual violence within a framework of carceral politics of the state. In this context, both male and female dissidents were relegated to a condition of necropolitics—their lives stripped of "use" to the nation. Both Wright and MacManus suggest that masculinist narratives of the state, and even leftist political groups, miss seeing and thus identifying this gendered war mechanism. They argue for a more humane and healing legacy that acknowledges the victims' experiences that are not readily recognisable as worthy in official or mainstream narratives. MacManus precisely engages with cultural and audiovisual texts evoking, acknowledging, and honouring this legacy—the 'haunting' legacy, as she calls it (citing the work of Avery Gordon)—to unsettle and rescript that exclusionary narrative of who counts as human (2020: 104).

I extend MacManus's and Wright's framing to the war context of Bangladesh where the West Pakistani state deployed differential and gendered violence onto the bodies of Bengali men and women, arguably a kind of carceral politics of racialised and sexualised annihilation of Bengali personhood. *Muktijuddho* film⁴ is a vehicle through which to imagine and reimagine that foundational violence and its continuing and rippling aftermath. Fox (2019) argues that rescripting, through memorialisation projects, can influence trajectories of public policy, civic engagement, and collective identity formation and citizenship. It is a way to 'flip the discourse' of victimisation to show how violence is core, not occasional or exceptional, to state operation (Wright 2011: 724).

This racialised and gendered analysis of necropolitics and sovereignty is useful to show the ways in which cultural producers have harnessed and excavated women's narratives in an effort to memorialise 1971 and to seek healing and recognition for its victimised women.⁵ Both documentaries revolve around the stories of Birangona women who narrate their experien-



ces, while at the same time reflect on state and social rehabilitation processes. Family and community voices provide the socio-cultural context in which these women struggle for survival and recognition. While the Pakistani state targeted the Bengali population as a whole in the genocidal violence of 1971, they deployed different tactics in the assault against males and females; they were targeted differentially and the former rendered expendable whereas the latter exploitable. The predominant Bengali narrative of the war that portrayed the mass murder of men and the sexual oppression of women, thus unfolded these gendered dimensions: men, even in social recognition, were elevated as Bir Muktijoddhas, while the women, even with their honorific title Birangona, were shamed and ostracised. Both films thus document the gendered necropolitics of the state and the ways of being that have been induced by war, state organised violence, and their continuing violent aftermath.

In *Rising silence*, we see not only this differential subjecthood but also the paradoxical consequence of telling women's trauma narratives through experiences of sexual violence. The documentary reemphasises the social and cultural scrutiny of survivors within a framework of gendered morality. There is an overreliance on women as victims and a linear tracing of trauma/victimisation, survival, and agency. We see this particularly in the depiction of Rijia Begum, the last featured story in *Rising silence*. Wandering the streets and slums of Dhaka, Rijia Begum narrates her horrific experience of rape by Bengali collaborators and the Pakistani army in 1971. She is shown lighting candles at a Sufi shrine while the song in the background plays: 'Can I find you in exchange for the tears in my two eyes? Do not cry, oh, master of my mind, by the side of the road. If you wish to find him in this life, go to His bazaar (Tarabatti performed by Moushumi Bhowmik).'

Rijia Begum speaks defiantly of the many hurts and insults hurled at her on the streets:

They ask why I don't die? Why I don't go away? I say, if I leave or die do you think you'll have an extra portion of rice to eat? When Allah orders, they'll take me away. They'll not take me away because you say so! Do you feel wretched when you see me, you bastards? Who do you take me for? I ask people around here, Where do you think each of us comes from? Search your roots first, then come and talk to me.

Rijia Begum's speech is spliced with vibrant shots of Dhaka, a busy metropolis, in contrast to the flat, bucolic scenes of the previous stories in the



film. A striking image of a tall man wearing a red and green bandana is contrasted to Rijia Begum's more humble demeanor. The film shows him striding confidently through the streets carrying a bunch of Bangladeshi flags. The camera then cuts to a gigantic billboard advertising Robi, a telecommunications company; it displays male and female athletes in red and green uniforms. A woman with long, flowing hair is shown climbing, and a man is featured with a cricket bat. The sign reads, 'Whether on the fields or elsewhere, in all battles, our indomitable spirit ignites.' Rijia Begum walks the streets, but she is not necessarily welcomed, let alone celebrated. Her story ends with her standing tall amid the bustle of the city and orating to a crowd:

I am not scared of anyone. I might have lost weight but my mind hasn't lost its weight, hasn't grown old. My mind is alert. This is my world. I have spent my days in hellish poverty and hardship in this country. I have suffered a lot. But I've watched while playing. I have more left to play. My game is not over yet. I will carry on if I don't find myself in our history. If I am not given a place to belong to any history that's mine.

The camera cuts to an image of graffiti on a brick wall with the words, 'VOICELESS BANGLADESHI.' Rijia Begum is not celebrated; she does not stride confidently bearing the flags of her nation. Yet she "carries on" and continues to "play", telling her story and constructing her own history—an alternative mode of being, the narrative arc here is defiant even if submerged—voiceless to the casual observer and in the official archives but eking out an existence nonetheless, still standing tall.

Gender, oppression, and the search for justice

The first story in *Rising silence* is that of Jharna Basu Halder in Barasat, Kolkata, India. In order to interview her, filmmaker Gazi crosses the border by train. This imagery broadens the scope of the war beyond Bangladesh. It suggests the ongoing repercussions of colonial divisions and the numerous partitions of the Indian subcontinent. Gazi and Halder are on a bed facing each other and conversing about the incitement of communal tensions leading up to the war. Hindus and Muslims who had co-existed for decades turned on each other and riots broke out. Halder, of Hindu background, describes her childhood in Bagerhat as 'beautiful', yet interrupted by news of communal riots. Their conversation is far-ranging: they talk about the 1952 student uprisings specifically, but also the ongoing protests against the West Pakistani occupation in the 1960s. They discuss the



language movement—the Bengali resistance to Urdu being declared the state language and the demand for Bengali to be recognised as an official state language—which was one source of conflict that led to war.

They then turn to the other main conflict: when West Pakistan refused to recognise election results that would have made the Awami League, Bangladesh's presiding political party as well as Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, its elected leader. Mujib's historic speech at Ramna in Dhaka on March 7, 1971, is spliced into the film: 'If one more shot is fired, and any of my people are murdered once again, then this is my request to you. Build a fortress in each and every home. The struggle now is the struggle for our liberation. The struggle now is the struggle for our independence.' While images of Mujib's speech are shown to ignite the quest for liberation among the masses in East Pakistan, we hear in the background the news reporting a brutal military assault, 'unparalleled in the history of mankind,' unleashed by the West Pakistan military. Grainy images of army tanks and soldiers attacking at first unarmed civilians and then guerrilla insurgents appear. 'Machine guns, tanks and saber jets against unarmed people. To make this challenge the people have one weapon, an indomitable will.'

Black-and-white footage of wartime reports relate the grand scale of military violence unleashed on East Pakistan, as Halder tells of her own abduction and rape by the Pakistani army. She complicates the narrative of the Bengali vs. Pakistani army by recalling that Bengali collaborators, Biharis, and Pakistani soldiers were among the men who raped her at her own home. When her father had been shot dead by the Pakistani army, two young Bengali Muslim boys from their neighbourhood sat vigil. Halder identifies one of the men who raped her as a 'Bihari' named 'butcher Majid.' Post-independence, Halder was haunted by his presence to the degree that she convinced her husband to relocate to India.

While Leesa Gazi's primary motivation in *Rising silence* is to create an archive of silenced stories, Farzana Bobby's narrators in *The poison thorn* speak more directly to notions of justice. To that end, it is a film that evokes a response from the spectators, whereas in *Rising silence* the filmmaking process appears to be in part Gazi's own catharsis and self-actualisation vis à vis the Independence struggle. Bobby's film revolves around the stories of three women, Ronjita Mondol, Halima Khatun, and Roma Choudhury. Though the film centres the stories of three women, surprisingly, *The poison thorn* opens with an elderly male patriarch commenting on the 'scourge' that the Birangona women bear on their lived identities. He leans over conspiratorially and asks the interviewer in the opening scene, 'She



[referring to Ronjita Mondol, who is presumed to be mad] is same [as] pros. Don't you know what a pros is?' This comment harkens back to Saikia's research where she points out Birangona women were stigmatised in society as 'equivalent to prostitutes' (2011: 56). In an interview about the film, Bobby says about the stigmatisation of Ronjita Mondol,

The first character in the film is Ronjita Mondol, who also happens to be the first war heroine [Birangona] we got to know after we began our research. I came across her name in a Khulna book on the war of independence, *The Victorious Campaign of 1971*, by Babar Ali. A line in the book referred to Ronjita as "crazy" [pagli]. I began searching for her. When I found her, I was shocked to see that what was written in the book didn't match reality—when Ronjita was a child, her parents would lovingly call her Pagli, so that was a term of endearment. The politics of morphing her pet name into an inferior label when it crosses into the public realm is perverse. She is crazy because she speaks out. She speaks of her pain. (Ahmed 2016)

The film then continues to trace the violence and injustice enacted on the women during the war, and subsequently daily, post-war. Bobby says she was inspired to make this film—her first solo project—because,

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I like to make films about things that make me uncomfortable. I made this film from a deep sense of discomfort. In early 2011, I had joined filmmaker Rubaiyat Hossain's research on Birangonas and while working on the project I discovered that in everything official—government documents, news, cinemas, photographs, essays—whatever the medium, all post-1971 representations portrayed Birangonas in the same manner: dead or half-dead, distraught, as mostly beggars. (Ahmed 2016)

Hossain, herself a filmmaker who has directed critical woman-centred films including *Meherjaan* (2011), produced *The poison thorn*, and Bobby's work is situated within a tradition of progressive activists in Bangladesh.⁶ In an interview with Rahnema Ahmed (2016), a renowned feminist activist in Bangladesh, Bobby says of her aesthetic choices,

The difficulty was largely because I didn't want to see them through a 43-year-old lens and didn't want to reproduce the patriarchal prism through which Birangonas are looked at. What I wanted to see, or better still, what I wanted to show was that which Ronjita Mondol, Roma Choudhury, and Halima Khatun wanted to show. This meant that I would have to create an enabling space first. This was the most difficult, and the most time-consuming part.



The creation of an enabling space requires the particular kinds of revelation Bobby strives for—that is, one that examines the tiered assumptions surrounding categories like human, Muktiyoddha, Birangona, and justice. This was particularly true in telling Halima Khatun's story; her role as a freedom fighter complicates the exclusive recognition of male heroism by the Bangladeshi government and society.

Khatun was 13 or 14 years old when the war broke out. She joined up with her maternal uncle and his contingent at the guerrilla camp and soon became part of the resistance movement. Alongside the male freedom fighters, she blew up three bridges. In one of the battles with the Pakistani army, she and her uncle were captured during a cross-fire. The Pakistani army buried her uncle in a shallow pit and took her to their camp, where she was tortured with other women over a period of five months. In the film, she describes her experience during this period as a 'goat set loose among tigers.' She also speaks to the gendering of male and female combatant experiences of war: 'We kept our weapons in the same place, we even slept in the same place. We didn't think of ourselves as men and women. But if any of them came across me now, he would tear me to bits like a tiger.' Curiously, she likens both Pakistani soldiers and her Bengali comrades as tigers when she emphasises her own gendered vulnerability during and after the war.

Her voice is juxtaposed with memorials erected in Bangladesh depicting the courageous men with arms marching purposefully to war. One sculpture shows two hands freeing a dove. In another shot in *The poison thorn*, as Roma Choudhury speaks of her social isolation, the camera looks out through a small window where a male farmer herds animals amid lush green fields. Together these shots imply that the women lead isolated and shackled lives, whereas their male counterparts in war are celebrated and free. Halima Khatun brings home this point when she says, 'I can't talk about it anymore. All things cannot be said all the time. My kids have grown up. It'll hurt them. They'll feel dishonoured.' She then goes on to ask, 'Why isn't she [the Birangona woman] respected after what happened to her?' Again, the camera cuts to the war memorials of male soldiers.

After the war, Halima Khatun explains that her father told her not to share her story with anyone lest it hurt her reputation and marriage prospects. 'Many people asked me many things. I said no, we weren't hurt, we are alright. Normal.' The camera cuts to aluminum pots gathering rain, the ripples coming to a still. An elderly patriarch in the community says in an interview, 'We have to find a way of keeping it [Birangona's experiences]



hidden. Hiding it means not letting it spread, burying it, concealing it.' He closes his two palms together. The stories diverge from time to time, however. Mondol's husband says about his wife, 'She is not the kind of woman to keep things hidden.' He also says that his wife has never done anything to 'bother him' and rather it was the community 'who was bothered by it.' And now as an older woman, he says, she can speak without fear.

Yet the violent legacy of the war continues to visit them—an aspect Bobby speaks to Ahmed (2016) about in an interview:

To think that a woman, a raped woman, can be socially hated! One comes across feelings of social hatred when Halima speaks of how people want to spit at her when speaking of her, of how she is not acknowledged as a freedom fighter. One encounters it again when Roma Choudhury speaks of how her son humiliates her, of how she was tricked and cheated by the men she loved. This layer about life in post-independence Bangladesh is present in the film.

In the film, Birangona Choudhury points out that Bangabandhu, the Father of the Nation, called on Mukijoddhas to marry Birangona women and then asks indignantly, 'Why didn't Bangabandhu get his son to marry a Birangona?' She continues, 'Birangona has to be married to Bir [masculine term for Birangona] to be recognized as brave.' Choudhury is critical of the government's 2015 policy of granting stipends to Birangona: 'Does fifty thousand takas compensate for their loss? Maybe they [Birangona women] can buy some betel nut with it.' Choudhury condemns the violence of the war altogether and states, 'I don't support the war. I don't support it still. I knew the consequences would be disastrous. [...] Why was there a war? I'd predicted that if there was war, the rich would get richer, the poor would get poorer. They'd lose everything. Isn't that what's happening?'

Reflecting back on the 1970 election that sparked the war she says, 'I lost everything with that one vote in the 1970 elections.' In a powerful statement, Mondol says solemnly, 'Nobody has ever asked to be forgiven.' We come to learn that she recognised the men who raped her—elders in the community—and that in "liberated" Bangladesh, they roamed around freely. In 1972, Mujib granted amnesty to the Pakistani soldiers; to this, Mondol's husband states, 'A general amnesty can only be given to someone who has not directly committed any wrongdoing, whose safety is in jeopardy. But criminals can never be forgiven.' Choudhury, too, talks about seeing her perpetrator on the streets and that 'he would lower his head whenever he would see me.' In contrast to Mondol, she offers a surprising



hint at absolution: 'I think he was remorseful. If he is dead there is nothing to be said, but if he is alive I forgive him.'

**Ronjita Mondol, Muktijoddha Birangona from the film,
The poison thorn directed by Farzana Bobby.**



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Figure 3, source: still from *The poison thorn*.

The theme of political justice is evoked in *Poison thorn* by the filmmaker, Birangona women, and activists. In an interview with activist Ahmed (2016), Bobby highlights individual women's quest for justice:

If she [Mondol] comes across the razakars [local collaborators of the Pakistani army] who raped her and looted their house, she steps forward and questions them. She demands they show remorse. Her defiance and courage are threats to the status quo. Many others are ambivalent about her for crossing religious boundaries and settling down with a Muslim man. The word "pagli" becomes an invective to brush her away, her dreams of justice. It's like saying that her insistence for justice and reconciliation is abnormal. Villagers also refer to her as a "beshya" [prostitute]. These words speak of how deeply entrenched local power structures are.

Bobby sees her film as a call to reject a patriarchal nationalism that labels a rape victim's resistance as "abnormal" and where women's individual as well as comprehensive notions of justice can be gleaned.



The unfinished business of justice for the victims remains an open question, as the women—unlike male freedom fighters who are valorised—are mostly outside the realm of state and even social recognition. The tremendous outpouring of citizens to demand justice for war crimes in the Shahbag Andolan 2013 (scenes from which are included in the film), the vociferous chants, the sea of candles on the streets of Dhaka seems a distant movement from the women's isolated existences in the far corners of Bangladesh.⁷ Choudhury complicates the justice process, stating: 'Catching war criminals is like the Bengali proverb, "Try to weed imposters and the whole village gets deserted." They are not a handful. There are hundreds of thousands. There are war criminals even among those demanding their trial.' The camera cuts again to the Shahbag protests, streets thronging with thousands of civilians demanding justice for war crimes of 1971.

Woman, mother, nature/nation: symbolism in *Rising silence* and *The poison thorn*

Anne McClintock notes, 'All nationalisms are gendered; all are invented; and all are dangerous—dangerous [...] in the sense that they represent relations to political power and to the technologies of violence' (1991: 104). The trope of woman-mother-nature/nation is entrenched in nationalist narratives. The nation-state relies on 'technologies of violence' to punish 'others' they deem politically subversive, threatening, or deviant. Patriarchal social norms and gendered state violence converge, particularly as notions of proper femininity dictate the manner in which militarised state violence treats the dehumanised populations. Women in nationalist stories, Cynthia Enloe (2014: 87) postulates, figure in as symbols rather than protagonists or active participants. Women's bodies literally and figuratively become embattled sites—they are 'both shaken by crisis' and 'actively engaged' by constructing new forms of womanhood. Their bodies are 'put on the line' as carriers and resisters/agents, in the process contributing to cultural renewal (Sutton 2007: 135). *The Rising silence* and *The poison thorn* trace the ways women enter the nationalist discourse through symbolic associations with nature, animals, and maternal roles and to what extent these depictions reinscribe/subvert entrenched narratives.

Much of *Rising silence* is shot in rural Bangladesh, which evokes images of the sonar bangla⁸—paddy fields, rivers and ponds, lotus flowers. These bucolic surroundings are often juxtaposed with women speaking of the brutalisation of war, as if to mirror how the cost of the "liberation" did not bring peace, dignity, nor acknowledgment for women as citizens. Both



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movies evoke the lush green landscapes of rural Bangladesh, but whereas *Rising silence* hints at a paradox between the brutalisation of women to gain the sonar bangla freedom, *The poison thorn* uses the landscape—often rainy and ominous, with dark clouds—as the suitable backdrop to the gruesome 1971 war and its failure to achieve real liberation for its women citizens. Another scene in *The poison thorn* shows hibiscus flowers in intense reds and pinks, nestled among the lush landscape, thorny brambles, and swamps—a jarring scene to accompany the stories of sexual torture and ongoing humiliation.

Freedom Fighter Birangona Rajubala (*Rising silence*).



Figure 4, source: photo credit by Shihab Khan.



Birangona Muktijoddha Roma Choudhury (*The poison thorn*).



Figure 5, source: still from *The poison thorn*.

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Both films also use animal metaphors. In *The poison thorn*, women's stories are repeatedly juxtaposed with birds to capture the sentiments of the women's narrations (e.g., 'goats set loose among tigers'). One image in particular resonates—a black bird trapped in electrical wires valiantly flutters to break free. *Rising silence* uses many shots of animals: cows grazing and at rest, stray dogs sheltered by the interlocutors. One scene shows Birangona Rajubala from Shodanandapur, Sirajganj, petting stray dogs at the same time she narrates a painful story about how she distanced herself from her own children to safeguard their reputations. In *The poison thorn*, Roma Choudhury is shown living alone with three cats, her constant companions. The imagery suggests layered connections between woman and nature, woman and land, woman and nation, wherein they are closer to these realms through their pain and spirituality, that they suffered irreversible trauma to birth that sonar bangla.⁹

The animals evoke Gazi's opening statement, in which she recalls that in 1971, her father witnessed hundreds of women lined up in convoys of trucks 'like sacrificial animals.' In "liberated" Bangladesh, Birangona women rear and safeguard the sacrificial animals. On the one hand, referring to women as "sacrificial animals" alludes to the human-animal species divide where the latter are seen as owned property. Animals here are without agency or selfhood in the same way as women—Birangona women—are stripped of their humanity and likened to "things" at the mercy



of men. Their sacrifice follows a particular logic of suffering through recurring themes of objectification and captivity. The exceptional suffering of women during war is also made mundane, domesticated through these scenes depicting animals. On the other hand, in post-independent contexts, women and animals are shown reciprocating active care of each other, in spite of their continued vulnerability. Such representations maintain the hierarchy between man-woman and man-animal, as well as the continued suffering of women from pre- to post-liberation Bangladesh.¹⁰

In *Rising silence*, the maternal theme comes into play early via Halder, the first Birangona woman to relate her story. Halder has two daughters and shares her traumatic past in a letter to her younger daughter, Prajnadipa. Prajnadipa tells Gazi that her mother's pain was always the 'third presence' in her childhood memories. Both daughters talk about how proud they are of their mother, calling her an 'ideal mother' who 'lost a lot but [...] was not defeated.' Halder appears on screen sitting between her daughters on a grassy lawn as they sing Tagore's 'Why do you look at us.' On the train back to Bangladesh, Gazi reflects on her own relationship with her children. She realises the importance of 'not to fear telling my children who I am.' As the train crosses the border, so too does Gazi—from the realm of an interviewer/oral historian/filmmaker to a space that she occupies with the Birangona women as mothers. This crossing of boundaries between interlocutor/filmmaker is a defining characteristic of Gazi's film.

When Gazi interviews Rajubala from Shodanandapur, Sirajganj, and asks if she can sit next to her, Rajubala answers with a question: 'Aren't you my daughter?' She goes on to ask rhetorically, 'Who gave birth to you?' Although Rajubala is Hindu, she connects her own spirituality and faith back to the story of Adam and Eve, explaining that both creation stories mean that humans were created to utter God's name. In the course of her encounter with Rajubala, Gazi comes to know from other sources that Rajubala has living children. Earlier, Rajubala had shared how her baby had been brutally killed by the Pakistani army at the time of her abduction. When Gazi interviews Rajubala's daughters, they explain that their mother suffered extreme hardship. She worked in other people's homes as domestic help to raise them. They came to know about Rajubala's experiences through other people. Now married with their own families, it seems they could not put their own family reputations at risk by acknowledging Rajubala. 'We could not give her companionship; we have our own families to consider.' In turn, Rajubala shares how she keeps a low profile lest her



experiences bring shame and undue attention to her family. Her grandchildren are picked on at school and asked, 'Did the military take your grandmother?' Her Birangona status is poked and prodded. Villagers killed one of her daughters because she protested against these community jeers. Her daughters were harassed and taunted about being fathered and dumped by the Pakistani military. So Rajubala explains, 'I don't acknowledge my children.'

Two other women in *Rising silence* frame their identities as mothers by highlighting their relationships with their mothers and their own children. Chain dau Marma talks about having a happy childhood: 'I did not have any difficulties, I had my mother.' Her adopted son, Kawra Marma, shares that Chain dau raised him with abundant affection, but upon her return from the military camp, the village community was unkind to her. Marma talks about her power in the face of trauma and violence by simply explaining, 'I didn't die.' Her story is narrated against the background of a group of girls playing soccer. The song in the background is, 'The Girl Is Goddess Ganga, Jamuna, Saraswati.' Juxtaposing the cultural elevation of girls as goddesses, and their potential athletic prowess with the denigration of Chain dau by her community again is a reminder of paradoxical gender norms.

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Tepri Bewa from Balidara, Thakurgaon, raised her son, Sudhir Roy, a so-called "war baby", among the taunts of the community. She tells Gazi, 'My son works hard. Why do people call him names?' Sudhir provides an answer for this question: 'Because they [Pakistani army] took my mother, my uncles are alive and my grandparents were saved.' Tepri was used as collateral by her own family, who were Hindu and at risk of being killed. By literally giving her ('putting her body on the line') to the army, they were able to save themselves. Tepri's granddaughter, Jonota Roy, tells Gazi how the community belittles her by pointing out to her, 'You don't have any ancestry.' But Jonota takes pride in her grandmother's role in the war.

These responses recall Sutton's (2007: 137) assertion of the significance of women's roles in political movements where they are both engulfed by the crisis and actively engaged in constructing a new society and new subjectivities. She discusses women in Latin America who literally 'put their bodies on the line/gave their bodies' and in turn rebuilt the social body, a form of 'sewn up skin' and 'renewal.' When Rajubala says, 'I am a citizen of Bangladesh,' it is this sewn-up identity she is referring to. She promises to 'give away to mosques and temples' the newly allocated stipend for Birangona women who have been recognised as freedom fighters—the very same mosques and temples that once shunned her but of which she is now



a patron. In *The poison thorn*, Roma Choudhury visits an ashram, holding the arm of a young man, presumably her son. Despite being a Hindu, who are typically cremated, she says that she would like to be buried and lay claim to a piece of land—a form of belonging to the nation that she has been otherwise denied. These gendered forms of labor and participation reconfigure women's bodies, maternity, and familial roles beyond the sacrificial to the maternal. Women invoke the metaphor of motherhood often as a form of embodied experience and knowledge that can transform and strengthen their collective identity as citizens.

Filmmaker as witness, ally, and critic

Rising silence aims to bring awareness about 'a forgotten genocide', as Gazi calls it. The film introduces itself as a personal journey of ethical reckoning with the past. It does so through the use of iconic visual and aural signposts and Gazi's voiceover narration, all as backdrop to the stories of the nine featured Birangona women. Nichols (1983: 25) posits that 'internal dissonance' is a key characteristic in documentary genre-based 'truth productions.' Such dissonance allows the voices in the film to compete with and contradict one another. This complicates the stories but also, and importantly, allows them to stand apart from the overarching voice of the film itself. The distinction between the textual voice and the authorial voice prevents the film from simply rubber-stamping a certain truth. This distinction of voice is also accomplished with inserted images and other aural and visual cues. Except for the collective story of Amina, Mukhlesa, and Maleka—the three sisters from Rajbari, Ranishoinkul—the women's stories are told in distinct segments. Their backgrounds are varied; they are Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, tribal; married, widowed, living alone or with children; from loving families who sheltered them and from families who cast them out in shame. Some are destitute, while others have a steady income. The unifying theme is motherhood.

Rising silence opens with a quote by African American poet Maya Angelou: 'There is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside you.' A U.S. civil rights activist, Angelou alludes to the suffering borne of racism and sexism, of rape and segregation, but also the indomitable human spirit that rises above pain and oppression. By documenting the stories of survivors of war-time rape, Gazi assigns meaning to their struggle. Her voice and constant presence affirm the women's experiences, yet at the same time frames the film's narrative in unison with her own. Believing that the women's experiences define the Bengali nationalist



movement and the blood-drenched birth of the nation, she shows those experiences also transform the women's selves, identities, and consciousnesses.

Styled as a hybrid documentary that makes use of self-reflexive, dialogic, and socially-engaged visual and aural narration, Gazi's own background in stage theatre and activism shape the film's inception and journey. Daughter of a freedom fighter, Gazi traces her interest in Birangona women to the stories her father told her about the 1971 war during her childhood in post-independence Bangladesh. The memory he shared with her about the captive women packed onto trucks like sacrificial animals haunted Gazi; in addition to opening her film with that memory, she shared it in a TEDx talk at the London School of Economics in 2015. 'This memory of Birangona women stayed with me forever,' she says. She adds that just six days following independence, the government of Bangladesh bestowed the honorific Birangona on the estimated 200,000 to 400,000 survivors of sexual violence in an attempt to acknowledge their plight and to integrate them into the nation-building process. Gazi posits that this collective honorific, however, relegates the women to just a title and a statistic; it obscures their lived and individual stories. 'They each have a story to tell,' she says. Gazi elaborates:

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I called the film *Rising Silence*, because we, both inside and outside Bangladesh, have enforced this silence, this hushed tone, this ugly secret, this implied blame on to the Birangona. Many times I have been told that this kind of work will help them break the silence. I used to feel pleased about that. Then I found that the Birangona women actually have plenty to say. All of them, in fact, own a towering voice and burning stories. These are the stories that deserve to be told, but are in danger of dying out. We have never cared to listen to them. So there's no scope to break the silence when we collectively have made sure that silence prevails. We have been busy stigmatizing them for generations.

In a televised interview with Shamim Ara Chowdhury of TRT World, Gazi states, 'I wanted to know them as they are [...] meet them [...] I see their faces now; I could have been one of them' (2019). Gazi shares with Chowdhury that since 2010 she has interviewed 80 Birangona women. To have these conversations, Gazi spent days cultivating trust and friendship with her interlocutors. 'I did not want to make them tell me their story. I stayed with them, we cooked together, went shopping together, and gradually they trusted me' (BBC Interview 2018). In 2014, Gazi and the Komola Collective, a theatre group that she founded and runs, produced *Birangona*:



brave woman, a stage production based on the stories of the survivors she interviewed. They took the show on tour in the UK and Bangladesh. Then, Gazi relates, 'the inevitable happened': one of the women she had interviewed died. She recalls, 'That shook me profusely. When a Birangona woman dies, her story dies with her.' That became her motivation to make a film about Birangona women 'because they matter.'

The Birangona women have been rendered voiceless in history; film gives them a medium to tell their stories. Gazi as a filmmaker/interlocutor personifies the contradictions of the documentary medium. The contradiction resonates with Hesford and Kozol's (2001) reminder that films about humanitarian interventions serve both pedagogical and memorial projects—they offer critical modes of interventions in disrupting monolithic narratives yet may unwittingly contribute to further reification of an entrenched human rights narrative. Robinson (2017) argues about structures of recognition and recuperation in representing spectacles of transnational violence. She believes that such spectacles/films are a call for empathy, truth, and justice, which, by exposing the audience to the trauma, can educate without being overly didactic. While contemporary films may not present a call to arms, she says, they do present a compelling call to bear witness. It is pertinent here to turn to an interview with *New Internationalist* (2019), where Gazi explains,

Filming *Rising Silence* was not an impartial, journalistic sort of exercise—I was already on the side of the Birangona. They had a voice already—even now, some stand on street corners screaming about the horrors of their experience. Others sit and cry in the market places, while those with money and status just pretend it never happened, in order to keep up some show of respectability. I wanted to give the Birangona a microphone, that's all.

In the same interview, Gazi says, 'I am an accidental filmmaker, really. I am not formally trained as a director or scriptwriter. Certainly, I did not set out to make *Rising Silence*—I did it simply because I had to.' We see Gazi in a multi-faceted role encompassing activist, director, and interviewer. She is moved by the burden of history and acts on it to bring to light the submerged stories of the Birangona women. Yet at the same time, she reinscribes a victim-savior or a survivor-ally narrative which centres her as the sympathetic ally. In the process, this diminishes the centrality of the survivors' stories. Evidently, the film memorialises the critical roles of Birangona women in Bangladesh's history however pedagogically speaking, the narrator assumes the authorial and authoritative voice.



The film begins with her voice: 'I am Leesa Gazi. I grew up listening to my father telling stories of a forgotten genocide'; it ends with her own self-actualisation: 'This journey has changed me completely. They have inspired me to understand who I am and what I am capable of as a woman.' Alongside the stories of the women she features in the film, Gazi's own catharsis is just as central to the plot. Indeed, it is somewhat jarring how much screen time is dedicated to Gazi in the film. Her presence is felt in every interview.

Freedom Fighter Birangona Rajubala & Shurjyo Begum with Leesa Gazi.



Figure 6, source: photo credit by Shihab Khan.

Gazi chooses not to be a "behind-the-scene" director/interviewer. She is shown arriving on train, by car, and on foot to the doorstep of each woman she interviews. She casts a lone figure, clad in cotton saris, a teep on her forehead, carrying a tote bag, and meeting each interviewee with an embrace. She sits next to each woman, so both she and the interviewee are centred on the screen. In two interview segments, she is seated in the centre, flanked on either side by a Birangona woman. She is not the distant journalist or researcher. Each question is asked in a gentle tone, and when the women talk about their trauma, Gazi reaches out to them in a display of compassion. Arriving three days early at Rajbari, she is shown walking with Mukhlesa Begum and Amina Begum on either side, and she asks them,



'Can I stay with you for three days?' The women readily respond, 'You have come here for us; for love.'

Gazi's involvement in the telling of her interviewees' stories is markedly different from Bobby's approach. Bobby maintains a more traditional behind-the-camera presence and explains her choices thusly:

I wanted to inhabit these women's perspectives. This meant that from the very beginning since shooting started, I needed to develop a method. I chose to shoot with a small Handycam, to have women in the team, to shoot in similar lighting, in the same season, and also, to make use of symbols, not have a commentary, to use visuals and audio in an uninterrupted manner. Instead of working with a pre-determined form within which I fitted the documentary material, I allowed the form to emerge from the matter that I shot. It took a long, long time, almost four years. (Ahmed 2016)

What most significantly differentiates these two films are the subtle ways in which Bobby directs the arc of the narrative. In allowing the form to emerge from the matter—the women's stories directing the unfolding of the narration—Bobby contrasts Gazi's approach, wherein the story unfolds according to the filmmaker's entrance, engagement, and insertion of self into the stories of the Birangona women. It is surprising that, unlike *The poison thorn*, *Rising silence* does not draw upon other scholars or activists who have worked with Birangona women or are experts on the war. This amplifies the arguments surrounding the silence and erasure of Birangona from the nationalist memory project. While Gazi's substantive archive of stories from a generation of women who are literally dying and taking their stories with them is impressive, certainly she isn't the lone voice invested in such recovery projects.¹¹ On the contrary, a rich archive exists in Bangladesh collected by activists, scholars, filmmakers, and in personal reflections and memoirs of the war.¹²

Anthropologist Nayanika Mookherjee (2015: xvi) notes that it is incorrect to assume there is silence about wartime rape in Bangladesh; rather, stories of wartime rape exist ironically in public memory and public secrecy. She talks about the extensive visual and literary representation of Birangona women as well as the ways in which women are often called to testify in human rights and activist platforms. What is problematic, Mookherjee says, is the predetermined logic to the enactment of these stories. She demystifies the singular story and strives for more ethical narration, often turning to the omissions and the seeming 'non-actors' to shed light on the way trauma is relived in 'daily socialities'. She seeks alternative narratives



that do not freeze, demonise, valorise, or obscure Birangona women's experiences. Importantly, she raises the paradox of human rights stories that highlight a singular trauma yet cannot accommodate the complexities of Birangonas' experiences. As such, they are often subject to authorial co-optation (Fitzsimons-Quail 2015: 27). Ethnography, in her opinion, can shift the narrative through parallel processes of autocritique and reflexivity.

So what are we to make of this image of the lone activist filmmaker on a quest to shine light on a forgotten genocide? There are lengthy self-reflections from Gazi throughout the film—she is both visually and aurally omnipresent, sometimes even through a hushed voice directing the flow of conversation while the women are speaking. What is one to make of her assertion in the TRT World interview, 'I could have been one of them'? Equally bewildering is the segment she shows at her TEDx talk at the London School of Economics—a dialogue between her and Asia Begum, a Birangona woman, following the theatrical production of their stories in Dhaka. As in *Rising silence*, this clip shows Gazi and Asia Begum, who had viewed the performance, facing each other and holding hands. 'Was I able to tell your story?' Gazi asks. Asia Begum responds, 'You told them properly, you told them well. Thank you, we are happy.' She goes on to say that Gazi's depiction has made the women happier than if they had been compensated monetarily and that the performance has assuaged their pain. There is a particularly emotional moment in the clip when Asia Begum talks about her entrance to heaven being forbidden: 'Our path is cut off. We are violated.' There is a valiant effort by Gazi to discourage that thought as both women are shown crying, with Gazi comforting Asia Begum: 'Sister, sister, sister look at me. It's not your fault.' Asia Begum expresses her gratitude and says, 'We have nothing to give [to you, Gazi, the filmmaker who had made their stories visible]. If we had anything, we would have given it.' Gazi responds tearfully, 'Only Allah knows what you have given, what you have given to me [...] You have given a lot. Give me your strength.'

This is clearly a sensitive moment, couched in the maternal role that also frames the Birangona and her relationship to the nation, even as it recasts that role within a context of political activism and political legacy. Women's sacrifice gained Bangladesh its freedom and yet they were cast away and taunted as pariahs. Gazi—the prodigal daughter/lone activist—returns to make meaning of that trauma and bestows honour through her heroic enactment of the Birangona's story (the theatrical production is a one-woman show where Gazi personifies numerous Birangona women). Asia



Begum thanks Gazi with a collective 'we', presumably all Birangona and by association the nation. In the process, Gazi becomes one of them by absorbing their pain. Gazi is an approximation of the nation, and on behalf of it she asks for the Birangona's strength, which enabled them to endure suffering, stigma, and ostracisation. Woman, nation, and collective identity merge here in the remembering of embodied knowledge and the configuration of a political consciousness borne of loss. It is a curious reification of the maternal in the telling of a nation's history and identity. For the maternal is also the entry point for the activist who, on behalf of the nation, acknowledges Birangona/mother's venerable contributions and literally gains strength for her struggles.

In a conversation with Frank Wilderson about the positionality of African Americans in the historical context of the U.S., Saidiya Hartman (2003) develops the notion of "the sympathetic ally"—in this case white allies working on behalf of black subjugated populations. This "ally", in their expressions and assertions of support, appropriate the suffering of the "actual object of identification" to the extent that the sympathiser becomes the proxy for the enslaved black bodies. Hartman argues that in order to make visible the suffering of the other, they must be subsumed into a common understanding of humanity and thereby displace the condition of the other. In her words, such expressions of empathy rely on the premise: 'Only if I can see myself in that position can I understand the crisis of that position' (ibid.: 189). Only then does the suffering of the other become meaningful, yet in the process, further violence is done—a kind of an insidious and ubiquitous violence—as the "sympathetic ally" does not "see" the other's full humanity. Wilderson cautions that this kind of appropriative solidarity belies 'that subjects just can't make common cause with objects' as these are not analogous experiences (ibid.: 190). The question here is whether such consumptive enactments of alliance recognise the desires and positionalities of the other or fit them into an existent social order of paternalism. What work does the filmmaker's ubiquitous presence on the screen, and repeated references to her own experience of motherhood and connection to Birangona women's suffering, as well as tearful embraces of Birangona women do?

Hirsch (2008) writes about memory projects that strive to salvage more distant social and cultural memories by conveying them through individual and familial accounts and aesthetic expression. This revival suggests that the individual structures of memory persist as part of the larger cultural archive, even when those directly involved have passed away. Hirsch



believes this enables those without a direct connection to be engaged in the post-memory, even after the originating generation and its family have died. Part of the purpose for propagating these violent memories would be to transfer the personal back into the political even as one is careful to not subsume the political within the personal. This argument harkens back to the discussion around producing disruptive archives of war where women's stories of trauma—however fragmented and partial—are integral to the embodied knowledge-making process necessary in redirecting entrenched nationalist, even human rights narratives. Gendered perspectives previously absent in the necropolitics of dehumanisation can broaden our understanding in mapping the feminist embodied knowledge production process.

Recovering submerged histories of women through the layered excavation and collaboration in *The poison thorn* and *Rising silence* helps move beyond a shame-stigma-honour complex. Reconstructed personal memories such as those in the films discussed here are reintegrated into the national archive as new official memories, as renewed bonds between community members, and as a means of revitalising a waning public memory and empathy that, over time, can become numbed to overexposed violence and trauma. Through visual texts like *Rising silence* and *The poison thorn*, viewers witness the personal and this becomes a shared memory. Gazi and Bobby, a generation removed from 1971, have created these memories anew and taken them to regional and global audiences unfamiliar with their context, thus injecting critical gender consciousness into the tired masculinist nationalist story.



Birangona Muktujoaddha Rajubala (*Rising silence*).

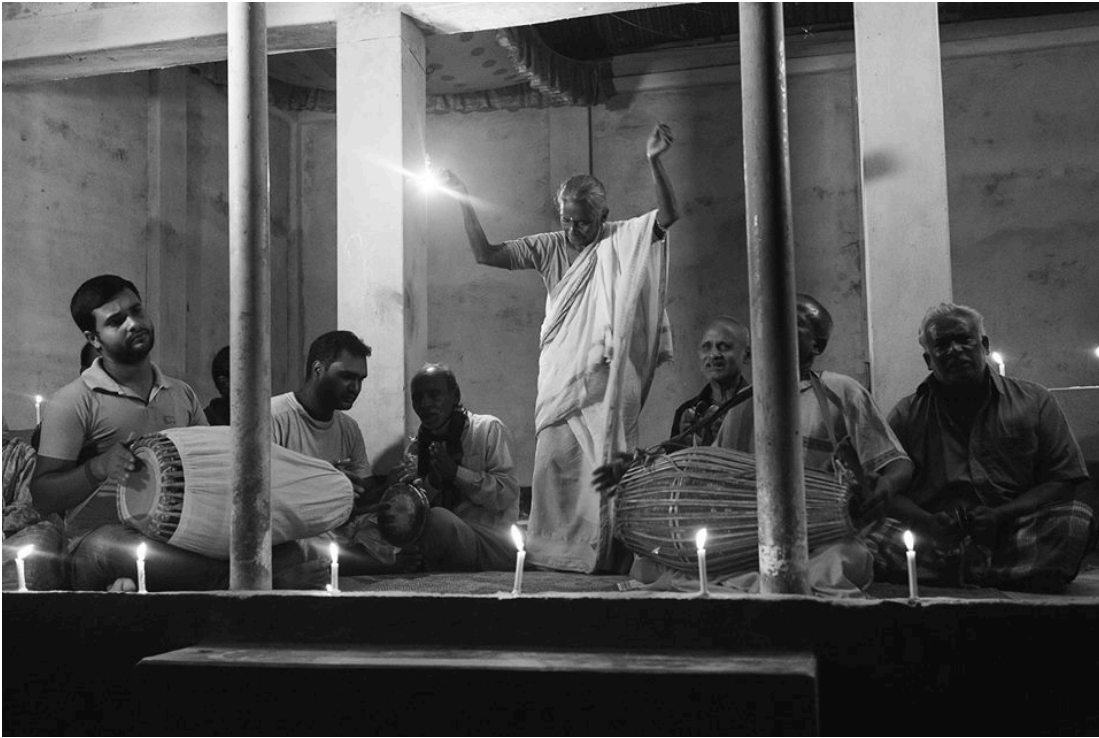


Figure 7, source: photo credit by Shihab Khan.

Witnessing publics

Both *The poison thorn* and *Rising silence* call for awareness of the "forgotten genocide" and its "forgotten victims", and they do so in ways that integrate the filmmakers as activists—more assertively Gazi, as narrator, director, friend to her subjects—who are observers and witnesses even as they incite audiences toward education and action. A particularly heartening development speaking to the pedagogical value of Gazi's woman-centred engagement is when she arranges a prayer ceremony for a deceased Birangona woman who had been shunned by her own community and deprived of last rites. The ceremony offers solace to her living family members as well as survivors of war and emphasises the vital solidarity enabled by such feminist embodied knowledge projects. The maternal metaphor is a unifying theme that both reifies women's roles as mothers yet also politicises gender within a nationalist movement. The sacrificial animal trope reflects the vulnerability of women, as well as the human-animal, human-woman divide where the latter are seen as property, devoid of agency and selfhood, of the patriarchal state and family.



Together, these films help create a collective feminine identity and illuminate the politics of a differentially positioned human identity based on embodied knowledge borne out of trauma.

Rising silence explicitly, and *The poison thorn* implicitly, incite the filmmaker/spectator toward disruptive knowledge and empathetic action in the ongoing struggle for justice regarding 1971. In the former, Gazi herself is the actor who is animated into her role of the activist/ally by the very stories she tells. *The poison thorn* highlights the Shahbag mass protests as a demand for justice, even if the women caution us of the hollowness of gender justice for 1971. Van Schendel (2015) argues that 1971 historiographies are reaching a critical juncture where a 'second generation' narrative is being constructed that is less reductive, more analytical, and more attuned to nuances of the multiple wars that unfolded in 1971. Arguably, *Rising silence* and *The poison thorn* may have reached that juncture yet do not quite fully cross over. Certainly both films bring to the fore the national silence as well as lack of recognition and justice, yet they also reinscribe the politics of shame-silence-stigma, which has been rendered an ambivalent/ paradoxical narrative. But they do further complicate prevailing statist and masculinist versions of the story by drawing attention to the suffering of women and by hinting—through against-the-grain reading—at alternative modes of being survivors.

These alternatives sharpen the analysis of the necropolitics of gendered dehumanisation and differentially constituted humanity of Bengali vs Pakistani, Birangona vs Bir, woman vs animal. Roma Choudhury's, Shurjyo Begum's, and Rijia Begum's stories in *The poison thorn* and *Rising silence* respectively depict how women are eking out existences between survival, a differential agency, and healing—existences that are borne out of their traumatic past, that allude to a disruptive nationalist framing of women, violence, and subjectivity. Finally, and importantly, both films engender the question whether their nuanced readings can elide authorial cooptations toward nationalist narratives where self-reflexivity—of the sympathetically—can unwittingly add another layer of abstraction to the path of gender justice.

By telling the story of 1971 through the lens of the Birangona women, *Rising silence* and *The poison thorn* contribute to the growing "disruptive archive" of woman-centred visual and literary texts. Suffering—by direct victims and observers—has been reconfigured within a 'human rights regime,' and turned into a 'standardized and constructed action' (Givoni 2011). *Rising silence*, in particular, falls within this regime with clearly



denoted victims, perpetrators, and saviors, with the filmmaker standing in as activist, sympathetic ally, and curator. Yet by centring women's submerged histories, both films also contribute to the growing collection of women's voices that stretch our understanding of the "human" upon which the regime rests.¹³

The dialogic relationship between Gazi and the subjects of *Rising silence* challenges official truths and produces a critical cultural text that provides insight into incomplete histories of 1971 and its aftermath. Further, her film recovers women's positions as protagonists and reveals a politics of solidarity. It unearths a feminine perspective even while the filmmaker is central to the creation of a 'hospitable memory' (MacManus 2020: 106) and self-referentiality is deployed as a communication strategy (Nichols 1983: 23). In the cinema of witness genre (Kaminsky 2006) and through the deployment of 'empathetic witnessing' (Hesford 2001: 17), the film leaves us with a sense of urgency—that 'do something' (MacManus: 107) response to the lack of justice for war crimes.¹⁴ The traumatic histories are henceforth circulated by and among viewers, who as secondary witnesses, may engender a public consumption, consciousness and engagement.

Endnotes

¹ Elsewhere, drawing from the work of feminist sociologist Patricia Hill Collins' (2004) conception of Black gender ideology, I have developed the concept Muktijuddho gender ideology (Chowdhury 2019) to denote the constructions of masculinities and femininities within Muktijuddho cinema that fall into discursive pattern of a normative perception of men and women's roles during the war of 1971. These perceptions are reified in cinematic/literary imagination and take on the form of "controlling images" circumscribing role assignment to martyrs and heroes for men and victimised and sacrificial for women. Collins traces the "politics of respectability" inhering "controlling images" that govern perceptions of Black sexuality as deviant whereby black men are seen as aggressive predators, and women as both categorically subordinate and hypersexual. The effect is that of a sedimented past reflected in present racial/gender formation from prior historical periods.

² I engage primarily with *Rising silence* and secondarily with *The poison thorn*, two noteworthy films that vary in length and overall technical quality. *The poison thorn* (40 minutes) was filmed with a Handycam as part of the filmmaker's own realist pedagogy, while *Rising silence* (75 minutes) is HD format, filmed with a small technical crew as part of a London-based theater collective. *Rising silence* received far greater endorsements, support, and circulation.

³ As noted the title Birangona was bestowed to survivors of sexual violence in the War of Independence in 1971 by the Bangladeshi government. It was intended to recognise their heroic role in the liberation of Bangladesh but was subsequently cause for further isolation and stigma in society. In 2015, the government of Bangladesh recognised Birangona women as Muktijoddha (freedom fighters). In this article I use the term to denote both the statuses of survivor and freedom fighter of women.



⁴ Films based on the Bangladesh War of Liberation in 1971. Kaberi Gayen (2013) has logged this genre of films, also known as national cinema, as those narrating the glorious nationalist struggle for self-determination. These films are set pre, during and post the Independence War of 1971 and aspire to a certain ideal memorialisation (shadhinotar chetona) of the birth of the nation.

⁵ Both Gazi's *Rising silence* and Bobby's *The poison thorn* illustrate the gendered necropolitics of the state and the ways of being that have been induced by war, state-organised violence, and their continuing violent aftermath.

⁶ Bobby's work is often cross-referenced, and she in turn cross-references critical activists in Bangladesh.

⁷ On 5 February 2013, protests began in Shahbag, Bangladesh following what many considered to be lenient sentencing of those convicted of war crimes—especially Abdul Quader Mollah, who had been convicted on five of six counts and was sentenced to life imprisonment rather than death. Tens of thousands of people joined the demonstrations, which spread across the country. Later demands included banning the Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami party from politics including election and a boycott of institutions supporting (or affiliated with) the party.

⁸ Literally "golden Bengal", this is also the title of the national anthem of Bangladesh.

⁹ A nationalist narrative literally translating to mean "our golden Bengal." It is also the title of the national anthem of Bangladesh, adopted from lyrics by Rabindranath Tagore.

¹⁰ The connection to the beleaguered women, repeatedly shown as wounded animals, is even parlayed through the film's theme song:

Hues in essence of myself
 Drift in wonder
 Yes they wander
 Bird entwined in poisoned thorn
 Wings asunder
 Entwined in poisoned thorn
 De-feathered I float in lilted moat
 Speech lost in swirling word
 Firefly glows in watery throes
 Emptiness in stranded pool
 Flutters, flutters, flutters
 Entwined in poisoned thorn
 Singed soul with fragrance lost
 Unending an ode to loss
 Deshacked a lost soul
 Muted eye bound in black
 In black flutters, flutters, flutters
 Entwined in poisoned thorn ("Poison thorn" by Priyanka Gope)

¹¹ *Narir kotha* (2000), directed by Catherine and Tareque Masud, and *A certain liberation* (2003), directed by Yasmine Kabir, are also films that activists have produced.

¹² For an extensive list of Muktijuddho films, see Ruksana Karim Kanon. December 2015. Our Liberation War on celluloid. *Bangladesh Film Archive Journal*, 9, pp. 75-81.

¹³ Differential positionalities of Bengali vis à vis Pakistani, the necropolitics of violence unleashed on male Bengali citizens vis à vis women, the racialised, gendered and sexualised violence against Bengalis, are all illuminated through the vantage point of the women.



¹⁴ Robinson (2017) also comments on the role of the spectator, whose historical knowledge outside of the film requires no action, because the action has become the actual consumption of the film. By witnessing not only the trauma but its ongoing history, the spectator lifts the trauma from state secrecy and isolation and weaves it back into communal memory. Once it circulates freely in the social sphere, Robinson says, the personal once again becomes political.

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