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Women and Resistance in West Bengal and Bangladesh: 1967–1971

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the transgressive actions of militant women in both the Naxalite movement in India during the years 1967 to 1971 and in the Bangladesh Liberation War in 1971. In its discussion of the active militancy of particular women it thus counters the many scholarly discussions of women as only passive victims in these conflicts. Through an engagement with depictions of such women in cultural production, this paper concludes that even despite their heroism women involved in terrorist deeds are consistently rendered as a bodily space of signification and that their involvement in acts of torture and murder is inevitably met with retributive subjection to sexual violence. Two short stories in translation from the Bengali language will be employed to illustrate my discussion, "Double War" by Selina Hossain and "Draupadi" by Mahasveta Devi.

Introduction

The years 1967 to 1971 in West Bengal and Bangladesh are prominent for their anti-establishment activity when taking into account two major historical movements: the Naxalite movement, which originated in India, and the Bangladesh Liberation War, which was initiated in East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) for its liberation from West Pakistan (now Pakistan).[1] These two distinct, though overlapping, events are frequently associated with displays of male bravery in

[1] The 1947 Partition of British India saw the creation of two nation-states, India and Pakistan. Pakistan was split into two, distant wings (East Pakistan and West Pakistan) separated geographically by India from 1947 until 1971. West Pakistan, often referred to simply as Pakistan, was the national center of the country, and East Pakistan fought a war for secession from it in 1971, which led to the creation of Bangladesh (known as the Bangladesh Liberation War). In this paper I shall refer to East Pakistan and West Pakistan in accordance with the time period under discussion here, that is, prior to the creation of the distinct nation-states of Bangladesh and Pakistan at the end of the Liberation War in December 1971. It is also important to note that as a result of the Partition of India in 1947, East Pakistan was created from the Muslim-majority state of East Bengal and from a portion of the Assamese state called Sylhet, while the Hindu-majority West Bengal remained in India.

ISSN No. 1948-1853

the uprising against exploitative landowners and government officials in West Bengal during the Naxalite movement and in the Liberation War against the oppressive rule of West Pakistan in East Pakistan, which culminated in the birth of Bangladesh.

Indeed, with respect to the latter of these two movements, the Bangladesh Liberation War, in which some Naxalites were involved, there is an inherent link to the character of the *muktijoddha,* or "freedom fighter." This figure emerged during and after the war, and implies a spirit of masculine, heroic, and patriotic bravery in Bangladesh.[2] Women most commonly enter this discussion of the 1971 Liberation War in the guise of *birangona*, or "war-heroine." Yet, rather than being an equivalent to the male title, this charged term appeared after the war in a Bangladeshi state-sponsored effort to eulogize the tens of thousands of females who were sexually victimized in the war for the secession of Bangladesh. It is, hence, not surprising that much of the scholarly discussion about the Bangladesh Liberation War, and indeed about the protracted Naxalite resistance movement in West Bengal in India, deals with the victimization and marginalization of women. This paper, however, seeks to move away from that approach by exploring the idea of women as active and heroic agents and as political actors who fought side by side with men in the Naxalite uprisings and against West Pakistani soldiers in the Bangladesh Liberation War. It will examine how women took on an increasingly public role in these struggles by vacating their private realms and by joining the guerrilla resistance in both cases. What becomes apparent is that in the midst of great brutality and violence, female guerrilla fighters undeniably took some ownership of a particularly male landscape of war.

[2] The terms *muktijoddha* and *muktibahini* refer respectively to the freedom fighters and to the collective liberation forces from East Pakistan that fought against the West Pakistani army in the Bangladesh Liberation War in 1971.

ISSN No. 1948-1853

Yet, what is referred to as a "guerrilla movement" in the context of both the Naxalites and the Liberation War can be—and by many classifications is likely to be—called a "terrorist movement" in which the role of women is understandably complex.[3] This paper will employ fictional representations to lay bare the often untold stories of women as heroic and active agents and not only as *birangonas* in order to interrogate this complexity. Although the short story form in particular is an excellent and unique resource for portrayals of women's involvement on the front line, it also reveals that, despite their heroic acts of transgression, women involved in terrorist deeds are consistently rendered as a bodily space of signification. Furthermore, this genre reveals that female engagement in guerrilla acts of torture and murder is inevitably met with their retributive subjection to sexual violence.

Two short stories in translation from the Bengali language will be explored to illustrate my discussion: Selina Hossain's "Double War," translated by Radha Chakravarty (2007) and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's translation of "Draupadi" by Mahasveta Devi (1981). Initially, however, it is necessary to consider the context of this time period in more detail in order to highlight the individuality of the women who became guerrilla fighters and to account for the societal norms and conventional gender order of the time.

Naxalbari and *Muktijuddho*

[3] What constitutes "terrorism" and what does not is, of course, a thorny issue. This paper uses the term with reference to guerrilla movements and resistance on a domestic scale in opposition to governmental or state authorities. I, thus, concur with Walter Laqueur's widely accepted definition of terrorism as involving the pursuit of political change and as including peasant uprisings, resistance movements, and liberation wars (Laqeur 1977).

ISSN No. 1948-1853

The Naxalite movement originated in the 1967 peasant uprising against large landholders in the village of Naxalbari in the northern part of West Bengal in India. The uprising was led by communist activist Charu Majumdar against the exploitative landowners and government officials, and was also originally supported by the revolutionary peasants as well as one of India's largest tribal groups, the Santals.[4] The Naxalite revolt in the years between 1967 and 1971 can be regarded as a guerrilla resistance movement against the governing powers in West Bengal in India and was, therefore, not entirely disconnected to the stirrings of resistance across the near border in East Pakistan to West Pakistani rule at this moment.

The Naxalites were a Maoist-inspired, radical left-wing group with strong ties to China. Unlike India at the time, the Naxalites did not harbour animosity towards Pakistan and, in fact, considered East Pakistan's war for secession from West Pakistan to be an internal national matter. Naxalite political views about that civil war resonated with those of the two superpowers of the U.S. and the Soviet Union, who were keen to keep their distance from a potential Indo–Pak war. However, the plight of the *muktijoddha* in East Pakistan was a familiar one to the Naxalites who were accustomed to resisting powerful oppressors and, hence, while the two movements were entirely distinct, the recognizable discontent of a repressed people led some Naxalites to support the movement for the secession of East Pakistan. In fact, the issue of support for the Bangladesh Liberation War was of such contention amongst the Naxalites that it split the East Pakistan division of the Communist Party (Marxist–Leninist) in its loyalties—either to side with the liberation movement in East Pakistan or with the national center in West Pakistan.

[4] For a detailed history of the movement see Sumanta Banerjee (1980) and Prakesh Singh (1995).

ISSN No. 1948-1853

Ultimately the different guerrilla factions of the Naxalites on each side of the India/East Pakistan border co-operated with one another and, in due course, pursued a mutually beneficial relationship.[5] Sumanta Banerjee explains how even as the Indian government opened its borders with East Pakistan to allow the Bengalis there to escape slaughter by the West Pakistani army who were fighting in East Pakistan to stop its attempts at secession in 1971, those same actions equally allowed Indian infiltrators to enter into East Pakistan. It also meant that Naxalites could move freely across the whole of what was originally the state of Bengal (before the 1947 Partition and independence of India from the British Empire) to pursue their socio-economic fight against the ruling classes in East Pakistan and also to engage in East Pakistan's freedom fight against the occupying West Pakistani army if they saw fit (Banerjee 1980: 312). Banerjee quotes an article called "Towards a Vietnam in the Ganges Delta" written by a "special correspondent" in the May 1, 1971, edition of *Economic and Political Weekly* that highlights the significance of the now-open border to the collaboration of the Naxalite guerrillas and the *muktijoddha* in East Pakistan:

> From now on the border is going to prove of great advantage to all guerillas […]. The fact of the occupation army in Bangla Desh being on hostile terms with the Indian Army would prevent the two armies from collaborating to the fullest extent in hunting their respective guerillas; but there is every reason for the guerillas to fully cooperate among themselves. (*ibid*: 313)

Another common aspect of these two guerrilla movements is the remarkable involvement of women in the field of conflict in both cases and the violence executed by these women.

[5] Indeed the *muktijoddha* were sometimes suspected of being Naxalites by Indira Gandhi's government, which was "very sensitive" about the Naxalites at this time and fervently sought to put an end to their resistance (Saikia 2011: 208).

ISSN No. 1948-1853

Traditionally women in Bengal, as elsewhere in much of South Asia at the time, had little choice in their experiences as women but to accept the traditional patriarchal roles of mother, daughter, wife, or any social roles limited to the home sphere; these socio-economic roles left little room for them to engage in more extreme pursuits, such as political insurgence. Yet traditional attitudes toward gender within East Pakistan were opened to redefinition with the emergence of the rural revolutionary sentiment that swept Bengal during the Bangladesh Liberation War. In order to examine this in the context of the Naxalite movement in India as well as in the Bangladesh Liberation War it is first necessary to consider an important forerunner to these: the Tebhaga movement in 1946.

The Tebhaga movement was a major agrarian struggle in the state of Bengal (pre-1947 Partition) that saw women of all creeds—Hindu, Muslim, tribal—from the lower socio-economic classes unite and mobilise against more wealthy landowners in a revolt against the unfair ownership and distribution of crops. Peter Custers reveals: "At its height the uprising was led by rural poor women who took the front-rank role in defending the movement's gains and in countering the repression of the state" (1986: 97). These women, who were among the poorest of landless people, unexpectedly created a semi-militia troop called *nari bahini*, which became a force of women's resistance throughout Bengal's insurgent villages and was in large part a reaction to the whole manner of ills and injustices suffered at the hands of landowners and state authorities. Bengali men were, of course, also involved in the Tebhaga movement, but they were often away from their villages and engaging in the conflict by fighting in the nearby hills and fields. Consequently, it became increasingly essential for the women left behind to defend

ISSN No. 1948-1853

themselves and their homes. Even when men were present in the villages, however, the movement saw women join together and choose to fight police or government soldiers without male support; this is evidenced in the women's retaliation to sexual violence perpetrated by state actors, which directly led to the creation of the *nari bahini*.

Given the spontaneity of this female force, it is not surprising that they were largely untrained in the tactics of guerrilla warfare and were armed only with household instruments, such as kitchen utensils and broomsticks. In spite of this, as Custers writes, they "excelled in shielding villages against the brutal police raids [...] they frequently arrested, repelled and humiliated police patrols carrying fire-arms, largely relying on courage and ingenuity" (1986: 102). They did not carry out their activities with impunity, however, as many women were captured, tortured, and killed by the police and soldiers throughout the Tebhaga movement until its disintegration in 1947 due to the failure of leadership. Furthermore, the captured women were subject to sexual violence and rape at the hands of police and state forces, something that certainly continued through later movements, as explored subsequently.[6]

The *nari bahini*, given their success in securing real economic and social gains, broke important ground for the participation of women in subsequent insurgent movements in Bengal[7]

[6] The horrific case of Ila Mitra, a female leader of the Communist Party during the Tebhaga movement, is one of the most well-known with regard to the violence executed against women at this time; see Kavita Panjabi (2010).
[7] In addition to the Tebhaga movement the wave of change in this region brought about by the 1947 Partition of Bengal should not be forgotten. The post-Partition emergence of large refugee colonies in Calcutta saw a redistribution of urban living space in order to accommodate the vast numbers of Hindu refugees flooding in from the newly-created East Pakistan to India. This, in turn, dictated the expansion of the domestic sphere as female refugees were often forced to find work outside of the home to survive, thus initiating changes in traditional women's roles. Women furthermore took on an increasingly public political role by participating in violent anti-eviction campaigns and by facing the police with their household weapons (Weber 2003).

and set a precedent for the engagement of women in the Naxalite movement. Women were at the forefront of the Naxalite struggle in West Bengal as they campaigned and organised against the police, carried supplies, fostered the underground communication network amongst activists, and acted as spies and informants (Roy 1992). Additionally they took on a combatant role alongside men, and were often entrusted with the planting and detonating of explosives (Gonzalez-Perez 2008). In her work on this subject, Srila Roy (2007) explains how particularly young middle-class women left the private domestic sphere to assume new roles and lifestyles amongst the guerrilla fighters. Yet even as they often executed activities comparable to those executed by men, Naxalite women's involvement in underground activism was not always valued as equal to that carried out by men; hence, women could not generally overcome the prevalence of gender boundaries and norms within the movement. Although their involvement was useful and their tasks continued as noted, the limitations on women that traditionally figure into any patriarchal society—even more so in traditional societies—caused problems for them and restricted their upward mobility within the movement.

As expected, the safety and security of women was an issue when confronted by the outside enemy, and Naxalite women were sexually vulnerable to Bengali male state and non-state actors (police, law enforcement, upper-class and caste status men, etc.) within West Bengal, but they were also at risk from sexual attacks by Naxalite men—their own comrades. This situated them firmly within a discourse of paternalistic protectionism that automatically surfaced, as Roy notes, "a gendered division of political space" within the movement that restricted where and how women could participate in it (2007: 194). From her interviews with female activists

ISSN No. 1948-1853

Roy garnered the pervasiveness of sexual assault against Naxalite women, or the threat of it, from men of all quarters. The fear of rape by state actors often kept women from leaving the movement, rendering the movement itself a safe space for women, but this itself, ironically, caused them to be sexually vulnerable to Naxalite men within their underground "shelters." Consequently, the heroic steps taken by women to fight alongside their comrades, and to pursue a political, insurgent agenda in which they believed neither guaranteed their safety nor included a specific agenda that would address their security as women but rather raised other problematic issues for them as women. Women fighting in the Naxalite struggle were often left without any protection as they faced possible betrayal by their own male comrades as much as by state actors such as the police or army (Roy 2008: 324).

This sorry situation is not far removed from that surrounding the later movement across the border for the secession of East Pakistan. While the dominant historical and critical narratives of the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War are replete with tales of male valour and the persecution of non-combatant women in East Pakistan, a closer look verifies that women also played a very active role in the freedom movement both behind the scenes and on the front line. For instance, not unlike previous struggles, women contributed to the movement in many ways, including in supportive roles such as providing food, clothes, and shelter to male *muktijoddha*; tending to wounded soldiers; and hiding weapons in their homes—all of which were vital contributions to the cause. Yet women also they took up arms and fought directly against their enemy on the front line in combat positions.

ISSN No. 1948-1853

Interestingly, this information has been left out of the official narrative of the Bangladesh Liberation War. As previously mentioned, the terms *muktijoddha* and *muktibahini* referring to male soldiers and the term *birangona* referring to a raped woman as "war-heroine" have dominated scholarly discussions about 1971, and it is only recently that women's engagement in combat roles has been acknowledged. This is evidenced in an article, "Gendered Embodiments: Mapping the Body-Politic of the Raped Woman and the Nation in Bangladesh" (2003) by the prominent Bangladesh Liberation War scholar Nayanika Mookherjee, which recognises the mobilization of middle-class women in the freedom movement. While Mookherjee acknowledges that "a small number of women also took up arms and joined the underground resistance in 1971 (though few of them are supposed to have engaged in actual combat)" (164), in general little attention has been paid to exactly who these women were and what they accomplished. In her recent book, *Women, War, and the Making of Bangladesh*: *Remembering 1971* (2011), Yasmin Saikia does give voice to two forgotten women who took an active part in the war as willing fighters. Their narratives of direct combat and the acts of violence they committed caused Saikia to question the conventional (and thus, accepted) representations of militant women in combat:

> We suddenly find we do not know the Bangladeshi women. Our lens was focused on a single vision thus far. We saw Bangladeshi women as victims of sexual violence and caregivers. We did not encounter Bangladeshi women as aggressive agents desiring to kill and be killed on behalf of territory and nation. (2011: 188)

Interest in and awareness of this subject has further emerged via the internet on various forums and in the media where pieces have been written about the heroic acts of these women, the active role they played, and the sacrifices they made for the cause. These forums constitute a

call for people to remember and respect the women who did engage in combat as much as the men who did.[8]

Interestingly, these forums have also coincided with a recent media interest in who these women were, what they did for the movement, and how to commemorate them appropriately. For instance, Manisha Gangopadhyay includes the first-hand accounts of three female guerrilla soldiers who recount their experiences in her article "Fearless Women Fighters" (Dec 2004). Published in *The Daily Star*, the largest English daily newspaper in Bangladesh, the women in these accounts disclose that many women had joined the movement disguised as men in order to fight alongside the male soldiers and did so without bathing for weeks lest their gender be discovered. Additionally, the women's testimonies reveal that the freedom fighting movement formed specific female guerrilla units and a training camp for women where they were taught to fight and how to use arms. One of the women, Shirin Banu, explains how she was part of the "first batch" of 234 women in a training camp in India. Another of the women, Farquan Begum, recounts: "I always carried a Chinese pistol. When I was with the others, fighting on the streets, I carried grenades." Although women's roles and responsibilities in more supportive roles behind the scenes were crucial to the cause, these testimonies reveal the significance of women's contributions to the liberation movement on the front lines. Their testimonies also challenge traditional patriarchal assumptions about women as more naturally peaceful. Another female

[8] See for example, the online Drishtipat campaign to remember and assist seven war-affected women: <www.drishtipat.org/1971>. Taramon Bibi, a decorated female freedom fighter, has received some attention as a result of her bravery in direct combat, see: <www.liberationwar71.blogspot.com>. Naseem Firdaus has called for *birangonas* to be hailed as *muktijoddhas* in her article, "Women Freedom Fighter: Better Late Than Never…" (2010), on <www.bangladeshfirst.com>.

fighter, Alamtaj Begum Chhobi, reveals: "During the war I killed members of the Pakistani Army and *rajakars* (collaborators). I used my guns and I used my bayonet. I gained a lot of strength of mind during that time."[9]

Beyond these online sources, many modes of cultural production from India and Bangladesh have made progress in unearthing the multiple histories of women in the Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971. A docu-film called *Tahader Juddho* (2001) ("Their War") by journalist Afsan Chowdhury provides interviews with female freedom fighters that uncover their forgotten stories.[10] A film called *Meherjaan* (2011), the title of which is taken from the protagonist's name, pioneers an era of new cultural representations of women during 1971 by focusing on a female freedom fighter called Meher who is given shelter by the central patriarch in the film. Meher then inspires another woman in the film named Neela, who has been raped and impregnated by West Pakistani soldiers, to join the freedom movement, and thereby to fulfil her wish to take up arms and seek revenge against her rapists.

Notably, photographic exhibitions have also drawn attention to the role of women in the Bangladesh Liberation War by depicting a number of now famous and striking images, such as female students from Dhaka University who publicly demonstrated during the occupation of Dhaka by the West Pakistan Army in March 1971.[11] This historical fact is also appropriated in

[9] Manisha Gangopadhyay, "Fearless Women Fighters," *The Daily Star*, December 16, 2004 <http://www.thedailystar.net/suppliments/2004/victory_day/vic10.htm>.

[10] Among the docu-films that have tackled the subject, though with more of an emphasis on the sexual violence suffered by women, are Tareque and Catherine Masud's *Narir Kotha* (2000) and Yasmin Kabir's *Shadhinota* (2003).

[11] Rivington Place, a public gallery in London, England, placed these images at the centre of the "Bangladesh 71" photographic exhibition in 2008. The leading photograph of this exhibition—which featured on the brochure cover,

ISSN No. 1948-1853

fictional representations, for instance in the character of Maya in Tahmima Anam's successful 2007 novel, *A Golden Age*. In the novel, Maya clandestinely joins the movement to free Bangladesh initially without her mother's knowledge and certainly against the traditions of her middle-class status family. This novel stresses a conscious imagining of an unrestricted and communal realm that is not the home space, *per se*, but yet a private domicile that women are permitted to occupy and in which they may express their own political desires.

The role of fiction with regard to the position of women in both the Naxalite movement in West Bengal and the Bangladesh Liberation War is a central one. Literary and cinematic portrayals of women were amongst the first representations to emerge after the 1960s and 1970s and have become not only a vital source of information and representation, but also a critical articulation of largely overlooked experiences. The dominant historical narratives of these movements often favour a sanitized version of events, not to mention a male-centred (and male-authored) perspective in which "small" histories are ignored or narratives that fit more smoothly into the hegemonic national discourse are championed. That is to say, a deliberate dismissal of traumatic, often disturbing, yet real incidents—such as those relating to women's experiences both as victims of sexual violence and as militant combatants—can occur, thus perpetuating the long-established authority of historiography that wishes to move toward national and ideological

in newspaper reviews, and in extra large format in the front window of Rivington Place—was of a marching throng of female students brandishing flags and banners while chanting slogans. Several of the same and more images featured in 2010 at London's Whitechapel Gallery in an exhibition called "Where Three Dreams Cross: 150 Years of Photography from India, Pakistan and Bangladesh." In addition, women from Sylhet are portrayed marching for freedom in the photographs of a 2011 exhibition and celebration of the fortieth anniversary of Bangladesh Independence Day at Rich Mix, London, entitled "Bangladesh 40: A Golden Age." The inclusion of women as active agents in all of these exhibitions is significant in highlighting their public engagement and emphasizes their emergence into the male sphere of war at this time.

ISSN No. 1948-1853

cohesion and away from unsettling memories that destabilize national development. In response to this, fictional and creative productions give a voice to those who often find themselves on the peripheries of hegemonic historiography. Through first-hand experience, memoirs, and the collection of oral testimonies, "lost" stories and scripts based on the real events of conflict and armed struggle come to light. In the related context of the 1947 Partition of India, scholar Jill Didur asserts that it is important to challenge the reliability of historical accounts and to review the historiographical significance of literature that enables a "re-presentation" and "re-appropriation" as well as a "diffraction" of historical events (Didur: 56)—which is something that the selection of short stories discussed later undoubtedly achieves in its exploration of women's experiences of guerrilla warfare.

Representing the *Birangona*

No commentary on the heroic place of women in the history of Bangladesh can ignore the reality of the *birangona*, or "war-heroine," which is a label borne by many Bangla women in historical treatises as well as in artistic productions. While the problems with and politics of this term are not the focus of this exploration, it is nonetheless necessary to consider this issue in the context of how women are usually depicted in the field of war.[12] The Bangladesh Liberation War is documented in fictional narratives largely in the form of short stories, which traditionally expose the violence committed against women by West Pakistani soldiers and the valour of male

[12] Academic research has increasingly engaged with the *birangona* and the silence surrounding the narratives of sexual violence; see Nayanika Mookherjee (2003; 2004; 2006) and Yasmin Saikia (2011).

ISSN No. 1948-1853

freedom fighters.[13] As in any war of independence, these men who risked and often lost their lives are lauded as heroes who sought to free their country through bodily sacrifice. Indeed, the common theme throughout the canon of short stories on this subject is the destruction of the body or the sacrifice of it through acts of violence against it by the enemy: captured men's bodies are routinely tortured and women's bodies are indiscriminately raped. In fact, even when these stories do not depict sexual violence, women's bodies still emerge as sexually vulnerable, and that vulnerability becomes central to their identities as individuals within the community.

These fictional representations are based on the realities of testimonies such as that of female guerrilla fighter Mumtaz Begum, whose personal story of her participation in the war is published by Yasmin Saikia in a section of her book *Women, War and the Making of Bangladesh*: *Remembering 1971* (2011) called "Survivors Speak." Begum's experience seems to reify the lack of agency that women had during the war because, while women were capable of bearing and were often eager to bear arms and to take an active part in the fight, their male counterparts preferred they remain at home and look after the household. As such, Begum's attempts to join resistance groups along the East Pakistan border were thwarted by male camp leaders who did not want women to join their troops or to possess arms. Facing this frustrating discrimination and possessed by a violent nationalism, Begum asks: "What gave them the exclusive right to fight for the liberation of our country and deny women the same right and privilege?" (Saikia 2011: 207). Her response was to set up her own camp with nine other women,

[13] The most notable English language collections of short stories on 1971 have been edited by Niaz Zaman, such as *1971 and After*: *Selected Stories* (2001) and *Fault Lines*: *Stories of 1971* (2008), as well as her collection edited with Firdous Azim, *Galpa*: *Short Stories by Women from Bangladesh* (2005).

ISSN No. 1948-1853

yet gaining access to rifles and being taken seriously by the male fighters remained very difficult. Another female guerrilla fighter, Laila Ahmed, from Rajshahi town on the border between India and East Pakistan, joined the resistance in 1971 after being forced to flee her home, having seen her family and friends killed, and having seen many women raped by the West Pakistani army. Ahmed notes that after the war was over no one discussed the fact of rape or the many abortions that were taking place to eliminate the subsequent "war-babies" (*ibid*: 200). It is clear from her story, as Saikia observes, that "[t]he harsh lesson the war taught her [Ahmed] was that her body made her vulnerable" (*ibid*: 188).

The reality of sexual violence as outlined by the guerrilla fighters noted earlier validates the claim that during East Pakistan's struggle for Independence in 1971 the West Pakistani Army used rape as a weapon of war to shame and destroy the East Pakistani women, which is similar to tactics used across the subcontinent during the Partition of British India in 1947. While the Partition surfaced specific tensions among various religious communities, the 1971 Bangladesh freedom movement surfaced indiscriminate tensions. In East Pakistan, Bengali Muslims targeted Bengali Hindus as well as West Pakistani Muslims, and Bengali Muslims also attacked one another. West Pakistani Muslim soldiers raped Bengali women in East Pakistan during the Liberation War in an effort to dishonour the traditional bloodlines of the Bengali enemy and to reinforce the purity of the Muslim Pakistani race within the Muslim Bengali community in East Pakistan, which they feared had been sullied by Indian influence as they thought all Bengali Muslims had been. The war was as much about "cleansing" Bengal as it was about retaining control of Dhaka, especially, it could be argued, when it became clearer that it was not going to

ISSN No. 1948-1853

be easy for Pakistan to win.[14] The plight of Bengali women at this time darkened further when we take into account that it was not only the West Pakistani soldiers who raped them, but also the Bengali men who took advantage of the chaos and carnage of the period to express frustration and anger against their own women by sexually violating them.

The official and contested numbers state that some 200,000 women were raped during the nine-month period of the war. The number was so large that it problematized the project of rebuilding the newly independent nation that emerged after the war. These raped women were bestowed the name of *birangona* or "war-heroine" by the newly established nation of Bangladesh in an effort to eulogize their rape as their sacrifice for the new nation. Despite the effort to reconcile and romanticize their disturbing experiences in the post-war years, however, the continued physical presence of the raped women, as well as of the West Pakistani-fathered children that many bore, within the new nation served as a reminder of the atrocities of the war. In addition, the shame and loss of honour associated with sexual violence and rape in traditional households meant that the *birangona* was, in many cases, ostracized from society, regarded as unfit for marriage, and unwelcome in her family home; ultimately the whole matter was "shrouded in zones of silence" (Mookherjee 2003: 161). Nayanika Mookherjee highlights the initial drive by the Bangladeshi government to re-integrate these women into society by setting up rehabilitation centres. These centres attempted to lessen the social ostracism these women faced because they had been raped by providing them with vocational training and abortion clinics for the unwanted "war-babies" with the ultimate aim of marrying them off. Yet, as

[14] This is something that is evident in the systematic execution of hundreds of intellectuals, professors, poets, and engineers by the West Pakistani army particularly in the last stages of the war.

Mookherjee points out, this merely made the rehabilitation and recuperation of their "female virtue" a matter for national judgement and did not stop the *birangona* from silently vanishing from public consciousness (*ibid*: 160-161).

Given the prominence of the war-heroine rhetoric in Bangladesh's history, a majority of short stories depict the particularly tragic fate of the *birangona*—although frequently in an indirect manner. Most often these stories obliquely reference the rape of women only to focus instead on the sad and shameful aftermath of the women's socio-economic experiences. Bengali author Helena Khan's story "*Virangana*"[15] (1990) relates this decline through a female character named Rehana. The story further stresses the irony of this woman being labelled as a *birangona*, which highlighted her as "special" to the nation, when in fact it is this very label that isolates and destroys her ability to survive in the nation. The injustice Rehana faces socially lies in the way others behave towards her—in the eyes of her family and friends, men and women alike: even as she is represented as almost too precious to touch, her shame is never far from her, and this simultaneously devalues her. Khan relates this irony: "Rehana had heard that a pearl-studded seat of honour had been prepared for her. But how many had the courage to sit on that seat? The glaring black copper of shame and distress would tarnish the glittering gold of honour" (Zaman 2001: 118).

The inexorable sexual shame of the *birangona* is often set against the heroic activities of men in war, which truly demonstrates patriarchal control over women's bodies and the spaces

[15] According to Niaz Zaman, "*Virangana*" was originally anthologised in Helena Khan's *Ekattarer Kahini* (Dhaka: Runa Prakashani, 1990) and translated from the Bengali language by Arjumand Ara.

ISSN No. 1948-1853

they inhabit. In the short story "Transformation" (1994) by Bengali author Farida Hossain, a woman named Nima waits for her freedom fighter fiancé Hasan to return home when Dhaka is finally liberated in December 1971.[16] On the one hand, Hasan is depicted as a hero: he dreams of returning to his pure and motherly bride, and is lauded as the valiant freedom fighter who has nobly served his country. On the other hand, Nima cannot fulfil the ideal romanticized by the *birangona* status she has gained. Yet when Hasan shows her a bag of gold and diamond jewellery that he and other freedom fighters had looted from Urdu-speaking merchants, it is clear that it is he, and not Nima, who should feel ashamed of his actions during war. Hossain's observation that "[s]he [Nima] had not committed any crime. She was innocent, but Hasan was guilty" (*ibid*: 110) calls into question the moral fibre of much-admired heroes like Hasan. It is most evident from this narrative that the crimes men commit out of their own volition do not stain their character or mark them as criminal, but are accepted as consequences of war, whereas wrongs done to women, such as sexual violence, are attributed to their character and become their eternal burdens to bear.

In the face of this inequitable representation of men and women in conflict, some writers have bared another perspective. Against the conventional portrayals of women and in line with the true history of women's seminal role as guerrilla fighters, some fictional responses have sought to defy the canon. In the subsequent discussion of two such representations, it becomes clear that female transgression of gendered spatial norms does not go without reprisal.

[16] "Transformation" is recorded by Niaz Zaman as being originally included in *Himalayer Deshe* as "*Charitrabadal*" (Dhaka: Anjum Prakashani, 1994) and is translated from the Bengali language by Zaman and Afrin Zeenat.

ISSN No. 1948-1853

Breaking the Mould?

Renowned writer Selina Hossain[17] has resolutely endeavoured to portray social and political crises in Bangladesh with specific attention to the oppressed and exploited. Her short story "Double War" is no different. Nurjaan, the young female protagonist of this story, is a strong and fearless freedom fighter against West Pakistani rule in the Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971. She is aware that because she is a woman she can access social spaces that male fighters cannot easily venture into and, thus, she knows she is very useful to the movement. This is evidenced in Nurjaan's ability to manoeuvre even as a prisoner throughout a West Pakistani military camp simply because she is a woman. Soldiers do not monitor her every move suspiciously as they might a man's, but rather interact with her more casually and willingly because they think she is a "harmless" woman. For instance, when Nurjaan is allowed to leave the military camp to "bathe in the river," it becomes apparent that through this ruse she is able to pass important information and ammunition to the *muktibahini* camp. In other another vein, readers are told that earlier Nurjaan had sexually "satisfied three [West] Pakistani soldiers by offering them her body. Suppressing the sharp pain in her heart, looking at their shining faces, she has taken this as her very own battleground. She wants to devise war strategies with her body, not with weapons" (Hossain 2007: 114). While Nurjaan seems to submit to these incidents of rape, they are in fact part of her available martial strategy: it is this prior interaction that allows her a short time later to re-enter the same camp after having planted mines and grenades with some *muktijoddha* that will kill many of those same West Pakistani soldiers. This scene

[17] Selina Hossain (1947–) is a prolific and award-winning Bangladeshi writer of novels, short stories, and other prose. Her work has been translated into many languages and frequently addresses social and political issues.

ISSN No. 1948-1853

follows Nurjaan's almost superhuman ambition to win freedom for her country in this guerrilla war; she is never tired, hungry, or scared as women usually are depicted in war and, instead, Nurjaan humiliates the male freedom fighters by presenting herself with more masculine qualities than they do. Her ready acceptance of dangerous missions seemingly emasculates her male comrades, as Hossain observes: "Her voice is like thunder, as if Bangabandhu himself has suddenly entered the room to stand before them. In Nurjahan's presence, they feel helpless, vulnerable [*sic*]" (*ibid*: 119). Bangabandhu was the honorary title for Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the founder and father of Bangladesh, and hence, while Hossain's comparison of Nurjaan to him can be seen as complimentary it also serves to masculinize Nurjaan, allowing her to exist as an authority with masculine qualities.

Yet Hossain complicates that masculine depiction of Nurjaan by also projecting on her different, seemingly un-masculine characteristics. This is shown in one scene where after Nurjaan has accomplished a perilous assignment to plant road-mines, she suddenly appears hysterical, and therefore, illogical. We are told that "[s]he bursts into a loud peal of laughter. A tremendous, powerful laugh, like a violent storm. The five *muktijoddhas* cower at the sound of her laughter. Listening, their blood runs cold" (*ibid*: 120). In this instant, Nurjaan's otherwise masculine, daring actions assume a different guise; she is presented here as an almost mythical female figure, a terrifying demon–goddess with unnatural powers. The sudden change in Hossain's depiction of Nurjaan suggests that it is only through such comparisons that women can be even imagined as stronger than their male counterparts; this depiction of Nurjaan is sanctioned by patriarchy because it mimics depictions of goddesses that are themselves

worshipped for their transgressive behaviors.[18] Hossain's projection of Nurjaan is further complicated by frequent references to her body, and, hence, the stressing of it as central to her agency. At no time does Nurjaan's body figure as an afterthought in the text; indeed the title of the story, "Double War," refers to the two-fold war Nurjaan is fighting: on the one hand, the Liberation War; and on the other hand, a personal war against men and the abuse and suppression of women through their bodies.

"Double War" reveals that as a child Nurjaan had admired female warriors and was called a tomboy. When she decides to join the Liberation War she is made an outcast for defying gender boundaries. Her father tells her: "Go to war, a young unmarried girl like you? [...] Have you gone mad?" (*ibid*: 116), echoing the long-held patriarchal idea that a woman who deviates from traditional ideologies about femininity must be "mad." More than once Nurjaan refers to the two battles that she must fight—the freedom struggle and the gender struggle—and in doing so defies societal taboos by using her body as a weapon of war. Not only would patriarchal society have her remain in the home or in the role of caregiver rather than in the role of guerrilla fighter, but the manner in which Nurjaan chooses to enter her body and sexuality into the public space of war defies all societal norms. Although the circumstances are not pleasant, she repossesses her body from the common standards imposed by men by using it however she wishes in order to attain her goal of liberation for Bangladesh and for women.

[18] The image of women who exert agency and who are active in militant operations as being akin to figures of a mythical or ancient past is a common one. In her article on Hindu nationalism, Manisha Sethi explains how the invocation of an ancient lineage—such as the goddesses *Durga* or *Shakti*, or the figure of *Bharat Mata*—makes the transgression of traditional female spheres acceptable. These comparisons and their accompanying status imply chasteness and purity however and, therefore, cannot be sustained should the woman be made impure by sexual violence (2002).

ISSN No. 1948-1853

Nurjaan's transgressive actions are illustrated in the scene discussed earlier, where she secretly enters the *muktibahini* camp to give information and ammunition to the freedom fighters. Upon her arrival she unwraps her clothing, and removes the mines and grenades strapped to her back and chest before the male commander-in-chief. Even as she disrobes in front of him, Nurjaan does not heed the fact that she exposes herself to a man as any woman might typically, because, in this context, she sees herself simply as a soldier working for her commander-in-chief in this guerrilla operation. Her relationship with the commander-in-chief is not based on sexual desire but a desire for political freedom. Later, when Nurjaan returns to the West Pakistani military camp, she creates an alibi for where she has just been by bathing and allowing her wet *sari* to cling to her body as evidence of a recent bath. By appearing in this way in front of the guard, Nurjaan is able to distract the guard from questioning her about her whereabouts and from thwarting her freedom mission. This scene turns on its head the frequently employed erotic image of the wet *sari*-clad woman in Indian cinematic culture. Yet instead of sexually objectifying herself purely to cater to the male gaze, Nurjaan here controls this image by appropriating it to trick the male gaze to her advantage. This imagery resonates further as it draws attention to the visible bayonet wounds on her back.

Later when the rebels' mines, which Nurjaan has helped to secure, have successfully killed a number of West Pakistani personnel, the soldiers immediately suspect and target Nurjaan:

> Without a glance at anyone else, they drag Nurjaan out by the hair. The torture begins. She doesn't scream. Bears it as long as she can. Makes no sound. Then she begins to moan. From the depths of her subconscious mind, the sound of her moaning spreads across the camp. (*ibid*: 121)

As is often depicted in narratives of torture, the pain of torture eliminates language by ensuring that the body becomes its pains through the internalization of the agony of torture and the inability to express the pain through language. This is also to argue that in narratives of torture the body is visibly marked by its pains, by the wounds and scars it displays; just as Friedrich Nietzsche reasoned that scars "mark the body as a public, collective or social object" (cited in Grosz 1997: 242), so do wounds map the body as a space of signification, whether they are the manifest wounds of physical torture or the damage of rape. Hence, even as Nurjaan remains alive, her maimed, naked body is hung up in the military camp for all to see. This action transforms her female body and its activities into a symbol of transgression within patriarchy, as an object that must be controlled and repressed, and in the Liberation War it also becomes a symbol of the freedom movement that must be suppressed.

This transgressive and tortured female body is also the focus of Mahasveta Devi's short story, "Draupadi."[19] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's introductory comments to her English translation of the short story discuss how Devi often situates her work in the complex politics of Bengali identity and Indian nationhood. In this short story, Devi achieves this contextualization through an engagement with the Naxalite movement in West Bengal and with the ancient Hindu epics. The main female character of the short story, Draupadi, is introduced as a tribal woman, who is also known as Dopdi. She shares the name of Draupadi with the wife of the five Pandava

[19] This Bengali story was originally published in 1978 and republished in translation into the English language in 1981 with a foreword by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Mahasveta Devi (1926–) is a prominent writer and social activist who was born in Dhaka, Bangladesh (then East Pakistan) but moved as an adolescent with her family to West Bengal, India. She is known for her commitment to the cause of the tribal communities in India.

princes in the Hindu epic the *Mahabharata*. In the *Mahabharata*, Draupadi has five husbands, who are themselves brothers to one another and the sons of one mother. Spivak states that in the epic text since the five men are Draupadi's husbands, the figure of Draupadi offers an exceptional case of "legitimized pluralisation" that not only allows for the sexual objectification of the wife—first as sexually shared by her five husbands—but also leaves her vulnerable to further sexual objectification by other men outside of her marital family who might perceive of her unique married status as an invitation for them to also further sexually devalue her. This is evidenced when Draupadi's eldest husband stakes her in a game of dice (Spivak 1981: 387) and loses her to an enemy chief. When the enemy chief attempts to publically disrobe Draupadi by unravelling her *sari*, Draupadi prays to the god Krishna to save her and protect her from being publicly shamed. The following scene reveals that through divine intervention, Draupadi cannot be disrobed no matter how much the chief tries; the length of her *sari* is endless and she has been miraculously protected by Krishna.

In Mahasveta Devi's story, the female character of Dopdi initially seems to have little in common with the *Mahabharata's* Draupadi. She is introduced as a tribal woman who is hiding from the Indian army, which is seeking her arrest for her involvement in the torture and death of a landowner during the Naxalite resistance movement in West Bengal. Dopdi, who is indeed involved in the Naxalite movement, has witnessed the murder of her husband by Indian soldiers. In the final scene of the text, Dopdi is captured and raped by the soldiers; Devi's inclusion in the text of such a scene stresses the continued sexual objectification of women from the time of the epic context to that of 1960s and 1970s.

ISSN No. 1948-1853

This link between the names Draupadi and Dopdi also surfaces in how Devi alternately uses both names to identify her protagonist. In such instances, Devi draws attention to the episodes where the experiences of Dopdi, a low-caste woman, can be directly juxtaposed to the gendered experiences of her epic counterpart, Draupadi. Devi labels the character as "Dopdi Mejhen" in the majority of the story where the character proves her brave dedication to the freedom cause; for example, when she is shown as enduring the hardships of being a fugitive in the forest, and learns of the capture and torture of her comrades. Mahasveta Devi writes: "Dopdi knows, has learned by hearing so often and so long, how one can come to terms with torture. If mind and body give way under torture, Dopdi will bite off her tongue" (Devi translated by Spivak 1981: 397). This steely determination and disregard for the physical self is a familiar characteristic of the resistance fighters of both the Naxalite movement in West Bengal and the Bangladesh Liberation War. Indeed, as with Nurjaan in Selina Hossain's story, Dopdi in Devi's story is depicted as participating fully in active combat with the enemy. Devi's mention of Dopdi's involvement in the torture and murder of the landowner she used to work for illustrates how the story does not shirk from offering an accurate account of guerrilla fighters, even female ones, who in the name of their cause were guilty of committing atrocities of torture and murder.

Devi, however, identifies Dopdi as "Draupadi Mejhen" once she is captured and taken to the Indian army camp. Details of Draupadi's torture and repeated rape by the Indian soldiers in the story starkly contrast the rescue of the original Draupadi by Lord Krishna in the *Mahabharata*. In Mahasveta Devi's story, Draupadi does not call upon Lord Krishna (or anyone) for help and, hence, no deity intervenes to save her sexual honor. Yet whereas the original

ISSN No. 1948-1853

Draupadi was concerned about her sexual honor, this Draupadi is not. Instead of fearing sexual defilement and the shame that accompanies it, this Draupadi views her sexuality differently. When the naked and raped Draupadi is called upon to appear before the *Senanayak*, or the Indian army chief, she is filled with resistance and refuses to put on the clothing he offers her. She tears the cloth with her teeth and has seemingly gone crazy, like Nurjaan had in Hossain's story. Draupadi's defiance forces the men in the camp to cower as they do not have the capability to deal with such a woman—a woman who will not submit to and, therefore, who cannot be controlled through sexual violation and shame. Again echoing Nurjaan's ability to emasculate the brutal men around her, Draupadi here seems truly mythical in her might:

> [She] shakes with an indomitable laughter that the Senanayak simply cannot understand […]. Draupadi wipes the blood on her palm and says in a voice that is as terrifying, sky-splitting, and sharp as her ululation, What's the use of clothes? You can strip me, but how can you clothe me again? Are you a man? […] There isn't a man here that I should be ashamed. (*ibid*: 402)

Here, Draupadi's body, despite its violation by men, defies male domination through its own will in a way that Draupadi in the Hindu epic could not, as Spivak notes, because she was "written into the patriarchal and authoritative sacred text as proof of male power" (Spivak: 388). In the original epic, Draupadi could only guard her sexual honor from one man by asking for help from another male figure—although a deity, it was nevertheless to a higher male authority not a female one that she appealed. In contrast, Mahasveta Devi's interpretation of Draupadi suggests that a woman's honor may be defined by herself and that it need not necessarily rest on her sexual honor, but on some other type of agency. Devi suggests that even in the context of the great brutality and violence inherent in war, women militants re-imagine the space they occupy

in it and that this re-imagination allows them to take some ownership of this particularly male landscape.

It has been contended in fictional narratives about the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War (and, indeed, this can also be applied to those about the Naxalite movement in India) that women who have been raped normally exit the text through death or suicide, as a martyr, and often after they have succeeded in killing the enemy (Mookherjee 2003: 164). Although this is valid to some degree, neither Hossain's nor Devi's stories adhere to this tenet. In both cases the female protagonist remains alive at the end of the narrative, despite the torture and violence she has endured. On the one hand, in Hossain's "Double War" hope surfaces in the worst moments, for example, even when Nurjaan is dripping with blood and hanging from an iron rod in the West Pakistani military camp after having been tortured and raped. At that agonizing moment, Nurjaan's male comrade from the *muktibahini* sees her and waits for darkness to fall so that he can bring water to her. Thus at a time when Nurjaan's fate is rendered ambiguous, she is still able to survive against the odds. Mahasveta Devi's Draupadi, on the other hand, displays an astonishing resilience when she dares the *Senanayak* to kill her at the end of the story. Instead of cowering before him in shame and being silenced after being gang-raped, she pushes the *Senanayak* "with her two mangled breasts" and reduces him to a coward. As the author describes: "[F]or the first time Senanayak is afraid to stand before an unarmed *target*, terribly afraid" (original emphasis, Devi translated by Spivak 1981: 402).

ISSN No. 1948-1853

Conclusion

As evidenced, while not unproblematic in their portrayal of female guerrilla fighters, the fictional narratives examined present an image of women who fight above and beyond the patriarchal limits placed on their gender. The women break patriarchal female gender norms, and leave their male counterparts and opponents disturbed and confused as to their display of femininity.

In West Bengal in India and in East Pakistan between the years 1967 and 1971 women breached the patriarchal gendered spheres conventionally attributed to them by becoming involved in guerrilla resistance. Their transgressions are often overlooked because they frequently resulted in sexual violence, which both exposed the perceived limits of the female body and also forced them back into the feminine roles accorded them in patriarchy. Their experiences of sexual violence and the resultant reduction of sexually-violated women to the state of *birangona* in the context of the Bangladesh Liberation War forced the eulogy of a "national sacrifice" upon the women. This "national sacrifice" was a method of "sacrifice" they had not chosen to make for the nation and, hence, promotes a reading of the women that aligns conceptions of their agencies directly with the desires of the patriarchal state and disavows any individual agency to them as women. With reference to both of the resistance movements under discussion here, it emerges that women are informed by the dominant male body first and the authoritative nation body second; in this manner, their bodies are multiply objectified, which even further problematizes understandings of their individual agencies.

ISSN No. 1948-1853

This paper has outlined how established gender codes can be fully reinstated in the context of women and war, but this does not discredit the immense courage and strength exhibited by the countless women who have fought in West Bengal's and East Pakistan's resistance movements. Consequently, this exploration moves towards a remapping of traditional gendered spatial delineations in the context of war. Yet it does reaffirm that transgression does not often go without punishment—one that has been presented not only through the sexual violence and physical torture of the women in the field of war and resistance movements, but also in terms of being punished for crossing gender boundaries and entering the front line of war by being omitted from many historical records. The transgressive identity posed by a *female* guerrilla fighter asserting her agency as an individual into the masculine space of war has not fit easily into the traditionally male-dominated narratives of West Bengal's and East Pakistan's resistance movements, or into the prevalent representation of women primarily as victims of war and shameful reminders of the atrocities of war. While the resolution of historical and sociological research is conclusive on the inevitable injustices suffered by women—regardless of their bravery in joining guerrilla movements and their desire to fight on an equal foot to men—the two literary cases discussed earlier hint towards an alternate judgment: female resistance fighters deserve a place in the annals of the movements in which they fought, defied suppression, and broke radical ground.

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