

Remembering the Nation, Remembering Women: Re-Presenting Women's Role in the Liberation War of Bangladesh in the Movie *Guerrilla*

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Abstract:

Both men and women of Bangladesh contributed in the process of constructing the nation. For a long period of time liberation struggle and warfare have been represented in the Bangladeshi movies just as a 'male zone'. The inherent relationship of patriarchy and nationalism plays the influential role in the cultural production of dominant ideologies. After a long period of forty years of the Liberation War a movie like Guerrilla has been made which focuses on the participation of women in the Liberation War. Exploring the relationship between gender, nation and nationalist discourse, this paper explores how the re-presentation of women in the movie Guerrilla redefines the roles of women, how they were 'misrepresented' in the previously made films and how Guerrilla also to some extent fails in its attempt falling prey to the very ideology it attacks. The aim of such a paper is the manifestation that although women have been censored from the texts of history, they populate in reality and must be saved from obscurity. It directs attention to the fact that going beyond the traditional and marginalized representation of women, movies can do a lot in constructing proper images of the 'warrior women' in the mind of the people.

Key words: Filmic representation, nationalism and patriarchal formation, women heroes and liberation war.

The movie *Guerrilla* makes me think about the myriad of images that have been portrayed in war films of Bangladesh

throughout these long forty years since the Liberation War of 1971 not only to deny women respect and recognition but also to dominate them. As women played active and significant role in the process of constructing this nation, the need is now to reconstruct the traditional ways of representation. Mass media exercise a powerful and persuasive influence in the construction and communication of images and the passive representation of women is really frightening. Film is one of the most influential media which can have immediate and direct impact on the mass. "Moving image is a febrile, story generating, meaning generating thing" (Kolker 1999, 14).

I am not a film critic and this piece is not to tell how brilliant the film is but to draw attention to the fact that how important a film can be in case of influencing, informing and facilitating decision making process and how through this important media national liberation has been constructed as an exclusively male endeavor which ignores the contribution made by women in the process of bringing the nation into being. After a brief discussion about gendered nature of nationalism, the relationship between gender, nation and nationalist discourse and the roles of women found in different sectors during the Liberation war, this paper explores how the re-presentation of women in the movie *Guerrilla* redefines the roles of women, how they were 'misrepresented' in the previously made films and how *Guerrilla* also to some extent fails in its attempt falling prey to the very ideology it attacks. "Nationalist representations have been in danger of perpetuating disempowering representation of women" (McLeod 2000, 114). In Bangladesh, the present generation mostly relies on the mass media to learn about the history of their country. Important part of this is cinematic representation of the Liberation War of Bangladesh. The purpose of the paper is not to glorify or condemn any particular film but to direct attention to the fact that the true representation of women warriors in films has become imperative to reconstruct the roles of women

that have been found till now in war movies of Bangladesh. The challenge now is to present the roles of women authentically and critically as a truthful depiction of the society and its roots.

Guerrilla is the first film based on the Liberation War which chooses a woman as the central character. Here Bilkis, the protagonist of the film – while looking for her missing husband works as a guerrilla with her friends. It's the first movie that focuses on the fact that women also contributed in the construction of this nation. Nationalism is a frequently “gendered discourse” (McLeod 2000, 114). Anderson famously describes nations as “imagined political communities, because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow members, meet them, or even hear them, yet in minds of each lives the image of their communion” (2006, 123). This idea suggests that “nation” and “nationalism” have to be purposely constructed or “invented” by somebody which means nation and nationalism must come before a community, not the other way around. Along with other things the media is also a tool which creates imagined communities, through usually targeting a mass audience or generalizing and addressing citizens as the public. Nationalist representations present females as the icons of nation and reinforce the stereotypical images of women as docile and weak. Feminist studies have discussed both men and women's relationship to the construction of nation and how nationalist discourse represents their contribution. Cynthia Enloe has an observation that: “nationalism has sprung from masculinized memory, masculinized humiliation and masculinized hope” (1990, 45). The films on the Liberation War has created an ‘imagined Bengali nation’ which consists of brave, protective, fearless men and naïve tender women. Wilson and Frederikson said: “Although women have been in the forefront in the struggles against colonialism and racism, subsequent nationalist discourse has tended to remove women from the public arena” (1995, 5).

The women of Bangladesh have not had an uncomplicated relationship with nationalism. Although they have been in the forefront in the struggle of the Liberation War of Bangladesh as soon as the national identity was gained they were marginalized. They are relegated to insignificant roles in the representation of nationalist movements of Bangladesh either as symbols of nationhood, to be elevated and protected, or as spoils of war. In either case, men are shown as the real actors, as the protectors of their freedom, their homeland and their women. Most of the previous films on the Liberation War of Bangladesh portrayed the nation in 'sacred' and 'pure' image of motherhood and the feminized image of nationhood influences the representation of femininity, masculinity and sexuality. Since the British period to the present the country is mentioned as "*Bangla Ma*" (*the Bengali Mother*) or freedom fighters as "Bangla Mayer damal chele" (the brave sons of the Bengali mother). In many nationalist songs used in films and even in our national anthem the country's image is portrayed as having the conventional feminine qualities like tenderness, beauty, and affection. In this type of representation liberation is something which is a male domain where the duty of the males is to free their 'enslaved mother'.

When looking at most images of women in war films, many of us become troubled and find it difficult to equate what we see with what we 'know'. This perplexity may be located in the 'knowledge' that the reality of women's lives and contribution is somewhat different to the way in which it is represented-but what is meant by that? The position which considers women to be 'misrepresented' needs to be justified because such a stance implies that the answer to the constant parade of stereotypical images of Bangladeshi women is to produce a 'truthful' or realistic representation of women's participation in the Liberation War. Now what is that truthful representation? There is no doubt about the fact that women actively participated in the war fighting alongside their co-male

fighters though the focus is always on the fact that they have sexually been abused. Captain Sitara Begum is one of the two women to hold the title “Bir Pratik” in 1995 (after 24 years of the Liberation War) for her heroic contribution in our Liberation War. Besides Captain Sitara, Taramon Bibi, there were many other fighters who have not been brought to the light. Murshid in her article talks about some brave rural girls like Bithika Biswas, Shishir Kona and Shahana Perveen Shobha who took up arms and joined the resistance as combatants along the southwest coast of Barisal. Like them, there were many other women who had also fought as combatants in the field, fighting to protect their own chastity and the chastity of their nation. Language has always been “a fundamental site of struggle for post-colonial discourse.”¹ There are some writings by women which express the experience of women during the tumultuous days of 1971; the ideas and perception of women about the war can be explored from this sources. *Ekattorer Dinguli, Judhdhe Judhdhe Noymash, Ekattorer Diary, Swadhinata Sangram O Muktijudhhe Nari, Ekattore Noymas and Ami Birangana Bolchi* are some of the books where we find women as freedom fighters, nurses, organizers, supporters, guerrillas and strong mothers who willingly sent her son to fight. Abantee Harun in her attempt to reconstruct the roles of women has shown through some case studies how along with the city-women, those living in the rural areas also actively participated in the battle.

Film plays an influential role not only in the cultural life of an individual ,rather the most significant role of cinema is it can also provide a framework which directly or indirectly influences the cultural construction and cultural maintenance

¹ Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin sees language as a fundamental site for struggle to fight against the imperial centre. Language provides the terms by which reality may be constituted; it provides the names by which the world may be known.

of a particular view. Feminists like Smelik observed film as a cultural practice representing myths about women and femininity, as well as about men and masculinity (1999, 353-365). What is not true in reality, can be made true in the representation of reality. So wrong representation costs a lot. If the viewer does not have the ability to understand the politics of representation and to decide which meaning should be taken, if s/he is not capable enough to reinterpret the work then s/he can easily get manipulated by the representation of the film; s/he looks through the eyes of the other and sees only what the film chooses to show him/her. According to Laura Mulvey, male viewers identify with the (male) protagonist, and the female characters are the subject of their desiring gaze. Female viewers, Mulvey says, are also compelled to take the viewpoint of the central (male) character, so that women are denied a viewpoint of their own and instead participate in the pleasure of men looking at women. The female character has no importance in a film, Mulvey says, except as a 'spectacle', the erotic object of both the male characters and the cinema spectators; her role is to drive the hero to act the way he does" (1975, 6-18). May be this is the reason why the inappropriate representation of women became so naturalized in films based on the Liberation War and in filmic representation, there had been no change for so long but in *Guerrilla* rather than being the object of desire who inspires the hero to action, Bilkis is the hero who drives the story forward on her own. She is a selfless, focused activist who, disguising herself provides grenades and explosives to co-fighters. When her friend and co-fighter Shahadat asks whether she really knows what kind of risk she is in, she says with complete determination that she is ready to put up with whatever comes her way to reach her destiny. Risking her life, she deludes the high officials of the opposition army at a party in Dhanmondi and sets a bomb there that goes off minutes after her departure. At the end of the film when she is about to be raped, she destroys the enemy camp using a bomb

of the enemies. It signifies how brave she was to bring down the master's house with the master's weapon. Apart from her revolutionary activities, Bilkis also often acts for her own pleasure. In the train when she was running away from the Pakistani army, she saw women being humiliated for not wearing cloaks which was forcefully imposed upon women during the Liberation War. Right after she saw this, she gets terribly hurt and takes off the cloak which she was wearing. Then she moves forward towards the door of the compartment and standing there tries to get some fresh air from the nature closing her eyes. In this very performance, she exhibits the bliss in her relationship with natural forces. She glorifies her individuality and suits herself for a small moment, as one with the cosmos. This instance, is optimistic and at the same time empowering.

However, looking back we will find a quite different scenario. In the country's first 'political' film *Jibon Theke Neya* the brother of the 'good' girl was politically active and when she was imprisoned she was freed by the help of the male characters. Moreover, the evil ruler was symbolized through a feminine character. In the movie *Ora Agaro Jon* there are 11 freedom fighters, all of whom are male and heroic. A woman in this movie kills her father for helping the Pakistanis who later kills herself too. It seems that the director was brave enough to reconstruct the traditional obedience of a daughter towards her father but could not show courage to keep the killer daughter alive. In movies like *Sangram, Roktakto Bangla, Arunodoyer Agnishahkhi, Ora Egaro Jon, Abar Tora Manush Ho* women were presented as sweet, cute, caring, affectionate, tender which construct the traditional Bengali womanhood (Bulbul 2011). Women in these movies are either family members or the beloved of the heroes. These war movies which are considered to represent the nation in the world could not go beyond the popular or traditional images to serve their commercial purpose. Moreover, the questions also remains that even if

women were given active roles in the movies produced 10 or 20 years back, whether they would get proper response from the traditional Bengali audience. Now when in today's Bangladesh men and women are seen working side by side, as equals, the director of the movie *Guerrilla* finds courage to give his practical experience a chance.



Figure 1.1: Poster of the movie *Ora 11 jon*-Koshru, the protagonist, is the macho man, the savior of the nation.



Figure 1.2: Another poster of the movie *Ora 11 Jon*: the woman has hanged herself after killing his father.

The director Nasiruddin Yousuf of the contemporary movie *Guerrilla* who himself was a freedom fighter reveals this while talking to Riffat Munim :

Countless women actively took part in the war and sacrificed their lives as fearlessly as their male counterparts. But when it comes to documentation, whether historical or artistic, all we find is an incomplete list of rape victims who, too, were badly treated after the war. Well, then what about the real female fighters? Have we ever paid a tribute to their immense

contribution? That's why I've cast a strong female fighter as my protagonist.

Women's weakness, lack of spirit and strength to survive has been continuously in the focus using the fact that they were raped. In our country where we have brave women like Ferdousi Priyabhashini who in spite of being brutally tortured continued to live as a normal person and becoming a sculptor represented Bangladesh in the international level, this type of weak representation of women cannot be easily accepted. She is the second Bangladeshi who has been chosen as a 'Hero' by the Reader's Digest magazine in December, 2004 for the valor she displayed in acknowledging herself as a war-victim. Bulbul has shown that in the previous films that three types of solution were provided for the raped women-suicide, marriage with the rapist and silence (2011, 26-28). Besides, the representation of rape in an unnecessarily erotic way can also be seen as a strategy for sexual display.

A different scenario is found in *Guerrilla*-when Bilkis is caught by the army, the officer in charge says all the nasty words to her and she is quite sure that she's going to be raped but even at that moment her brain doesn't stop working. When the officer throws her on the table, she steals a bomb and destroys the enemy camp. Rather letting herself to be abused, she resists with all her power when she chooses to die and at the same time destructs the base camp of the enemy. On the other hand, it can also be argued that the director agrees with the dominant social notion of women's sexual chastity which always promotes the idea that it is rather right to die than to be raped. Though the director claims in the same news by Riffat Munim: "With such a revolting act of self-sacrifice, her uncertain, allegorical journey comes full circle."

Regardless of my rational and emotional association with the film encouraged by its very new and different type of portrayal, I would like to question some of its implications. Though Bilkis is a banker by profession and works undercover

for the “Muktibahini”, the director still could not overlook her domestic responsibilities. She is represented as kind of a “perfect women” who has to balance between her home and her workplace. She is continually criticized by her mother-in-law for her “lack of femininity” though she tries her best to balance. “Women's interactions [are] very often concerned with romance or family problems (in 74 per cent of cases) whereas men's interactions [are] not frequently concerned with these matters” (Gauntlett 2002, 43). Bilkis loves her husband very much and in her inner psyche she is always reminiscing the romantic moments with her husband but with the scarcity of women heroes and feminist content in Bangladeshi war based film, would not a film demonstrating a women’s thinking and psychological turmoil regarding her nation’s liberation be more useful? Moreover, we see Bilkis’s husband and her friends engaging in serious political discussion but though being present in the scene, Bilkis is not shown taking part in the discussion with them.

Betty Friedan says in *The Feminine Mystique* that writing for the magazines in the 1950s she was continually reminded by editors that ‘women have to identify’. So when she once chose to write about an artist she had had to write about her cooking, shopping, falling in love with her husband and painting a crib for her baby but she had to leave out the hours she spent painting her pictures, her serious work and the way she felt about it. “ You could sometimes get away with writing about a woman,” says Betty, “ who was not really a housewife, if you made her *sound* like a housewife, if you left out her commitment to the world outside the home, or the private vision of mind or spirit that she pursued ”(qtd. in Gauntlett 2002, 51). It will not be wrong to say that similar kind of notions operate behind the scene here. If the director showed Bilkis without her domestic responsibilities and without her romantic involvement with her husband, the audience might not have found it an “appropriate” portrayal. So to focus on her

activism the director put some “womanly” attributes in her characterization. Bilkis cannot go to search for her husband even if she really wants to because she has to look after her mother-in-law. Nevertheless, it can also be argued that showing her utmost effort to balance between the public and the private life the director actually shows how problematic it was for a Bangladeshi woman to enter into a warlike situation. From one perspective, the “woman –hero”² is the most oppressed in the film. She can be humiliated not only by the Pakistanis but also by the male traitors of her own race. However, the perception of oppression and the need to protest are apparent. Bilkis is courage enough to protest while the “rajakars” try to physically harass her publicly though at last she is rescued by the male members of the society. Most of the time women are confined to “safe places”³ and positions within the narrative which eventually come within the range of male vision or audition. Bilkis is definitely a very strong character but it would be more praiseworthy if the director could show a woman *actually fighting* in a battle. When Bilkis goes to her brother’s house to collect goods which she has to deliver secretly, she is always escorted by a male member of the group. Several times when Bilkis is in trouble she is rescued out of it with the help of a male person. Some critics might find fault with the slight exhibition of her physical beauty to get benefit at the party where she has gone to set a bomb. I would rather say that it is just one technique amongst many that she uses to achieve her goal since it is actually her intelligence which brings the success and since nobody ever called a male hero 'bimbo' just because he sometimes used his attractive look and charm to get what he wanted. Moreover, all the women fighters in this movie are from middle and upper class society who live in the city but

² Doane explains that a “woman-hero” manifests her totality through her flaws manifested by the patriarchy.

³ Stephan Heath depicts the inclusion of the voice into the narrative as its preservation within a “safe place” and adds that this place is cautiously maintained in the fiction film.

there are numerous rural women whose contribution is yet to be projected in films.

Throughout my paper I've tried to analyze the representation of women and their role in the movie *Guerrilla* focusing on how the film's new representation criticizes the dominant patriarchal nationalist ideologies which overshadowed the filmic portrayal for a long time. Furthermore, I also tried to show the ways in which the film sometimes becomes the unwitting prey of the very ideology it attacks. There may be no escape from our ambivalences but such a venture may help us to balance while reconstructing our own history and our own identity.

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