

Reconstructing the Identity of the Birangana as Hero



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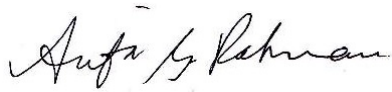
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CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

I hereby declare that this thesis is the student's own work and effort. All sources of information incorporated here have been duly acknowledged. This thesis has been submitted with my approval.



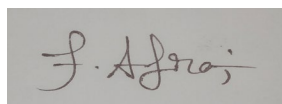
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DECLARATION

This thesis is a presentation of my original research work. Wherever contributions of others are involved, every effort is made to indicate this clearly, with due reference to the literature, and acknowledgement of collaborative research and discussions.

A rectangular box containing a handwritten signature in dark ink. The signature appears to be 'F. Afroj' with a stylized flourish at the end.

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Dedication

This work is dedicated to all the Biranganas whom the society once failed to protect. So much of their lives had been detested, denied, and erased. Yet they resisted, they fought, they continued their struggle to build their own sanctuary — like true heroes.

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Abstract

Sexual violence against women in wartime has been a prominent scenario of war narratives throughout history, and the 1971 Liberation War of Bangladesh is no different. According to narratives focused on 1971, 200,000-400,000 women were raped during the nine-month battle. On 22nd December 1971, the then president of Bangladesh, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, designated the rape survivors as Birangana (or war heroines) to restore their honor and facilitate their rehabilitation, which is an act historically and internationally unprecedented. However, though these women were called war heroines, they were, unfortunately, seen as fallen women by their communities. This paper aims to inspect why the Birangana's identity has been shaped as victim, and not as hero. A close textual analysis would be used to study Rizia Rahman's *Letters of Blood*, Shaheen Akhtar's *The Search*, and Dilruba Z. Ara's *Blame* using Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann's theory of "social constructionism" to reconstruct the Biranganas' identity as heroes. The study also includes Judith Butler's theory of "gender performativity" to reconstruct the gender roles and women's identity as victors, not victims. A few additional theoretical concepts by Franco, Kramer, and others regarding "heroism" are used to show how the Biranganas can be defined as heroic figures. The Biranganas such as Yasmin, Mariam, Laila, and many others from *Letters of Blood*, *The Search* and *Blame* are denied any identity other than that of the fallen woman, but their resistance and willpower to liberate themselves from this stigmatized identity is what makes them heroes.

Keywords: Birangana, heroism, fallen women, hero, victim, construction of identity, gender

Chapter One

Introduction

The history of human civilization shows that war brings nothing but destruction and the social minorities are the ones to get mostly affected in the aftermath of war. The Liberation War of Bangladesh recounts the same narrative of devastation as it faced a massive amount of violence executed by the Pakistani Army, and its collaborators, known as Razakars. Historical records claim that around three million people were tortured and killed during the nine-month-long war. Around ten million people were dislocated and most of them were Bengali Hindus who are a minority group of Bangladesh. They fled to the neighboring country in order to escape the mass killing carried out by the Pakistani soldiers. As the war came to an end the newly liberated country acclaimed its men as Muktiyoddha (freedom fighter) and entitled its women Birangana (war heroines). But it is the heroic ventures of the Muktiyoddhas that dominate the major share of both the national discourse and collective memory of war history.

However, the notion of the Birangana remains as another predominant but scarcely explored narrative of the war. The national narrative estimates that around 200,000-400,000 women were raped throughout the nine months of the liberation struggle and more than 25,000 were pregnant with a child of the Pakistani army by the end of December. (Brownmiller 84). On 23rd December 1971, the Minister of Relief and Rehabilitation, Abul Hasnat Muhammad Qamaruzzaman, declared that women who took part in the war, both actively and indirectly, and faced its viciousness would be known as Biranganas which literally translates to the brave ones.

The Father of the Nation, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibor Rahman further popularized this term by calling the Biranganas “my mothers and sisters” (Mookherjee, “The Birangana Beyond”). This act of honoring the sexual victims of war as war heroines remains historically unprecedented to this day as Brownmiller mentions, “The story of Bangladesh was unique in one respect. For the first time in history the rape of women in war, and the complex aftermath of mass assault, received serious international attention” (86). However, ironically, these women were remembered as victims only as the patriarchal society refused to consider them as anything but polluted women. Though the country attempted to reinstate these women to their former status through several schemes, the rehabilitation program resulted in a failed mission as most of these women were abandoned by their families as well as communities.

As a patriarchal society proclaims the virginity of a woman to be equivalent to her honor, Bangladesh too as a country deeply rooted in patriarchy inflicted utter shame and humiliation upon the Biranganas since these sexual victims were seen as fallen women by their communities, though they were declared as war heroines by the government. Besides, as sex is considered taboo in this part of the world, the Bangladeshi society attempted to somewhat conceal the history of mass sexual violence by silencing its rape victims while homogenizing their experiences regarding sexual violence and its aftermath. In 1971, shortly after independence, the celebrated photographer Naib Uddin Ahmed captured an image of a Birangana where the “woman’s face is completely concealed by her flowing hair, which in turn is held back by her clenched fists” (Menon 12), and this photograph garnered great attention on both local and international platforms. The photograph quickly became the archetype of the Birangana figure. Thereby, the national narrative and public discourses have etched a fixed image of the Biranganas as fallen women who remained hidden and mute due to their acute sense of shame

and guilt. This thesis, however, aims to show that not all Biranganas desired to remain hidden behind their tousled hair in shame. Some challenged the discourses that portrayed Biranganas as helpless rape victims only by highlighting their heroic strengths which was used to tackle the stigma of the fallen woman. The thesis explores Rizia Rahman's *Rokter Okkhor* (translated as *Letters of Blood* by Arunava Sinha in 2016), Shaheen Akhtar's *Talaash* (translated as *The Search* by Ella Dutta in 2011), and Dilruba Z. Ara's *Blame* in light of Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann's theory of "social constructionism," Judith Butler's theory of "gender performativity" and Zeno E. Franco et al., Roderick Kramer, and others' notion of "heroism" to examine how and why the Biranganas' identity was shaped as fallen women in a liberated Bangladesh, and to reconstruct their identity as heroes. This thesis uses the translated versions of *Rokter Okkhor* and *Talaash* for its references.

Letters of Blood, *The Search*, and *Blame* — all three of the novels depict how the Biranganas, who once had ordinary lives before the war, could not continue with their old lives in the post-war period since the society identified them as not the brave ones but as rape victims or fallen women. However, one might ask, how does a society construct one's identity? Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann introduced the idea of "social constructionism" in their book *The Social Construction of Reality* where they claimed that the reality that we believe in, the norms and values that we practice, are socially constructed and biased as they have been formed by shared human interaction. So "social order is a human product" (69), and humans are the product of that very society. Moreover, they state that one's identity is not fixed, rather "Identity is formed by social processes" (194), and once it has been formed, the social relations maintain, modify, and even reshape it according to society's demand. As humans as social entities identify themselves through their interactions with others in the society and see themselves through the

eyes of others, they accept the identities as reality that society imposes on them. Thus society constructs one's identity.

In order to nullify the socially constructed identity of Biranganas as fallen women and to reconstruct their identity as heroes, it is important to understand the definition of heroism too. But what are the true criteria of heroism as different scholars have given contrasting definitions of heroism? For more than two millennia people considered the Aristotelian definition of heroism to be standard, and according to Aristotle, tragic heroes are men of noble birth with great heroic attributes but who also possess tragic flaws, and it is their own flaw or mistake that brings their downfall. Though Aristotle's definition of the hero discards ordinary men as heroic figures, recent scholars have suggested that heroism is an attribute that can be attained by any member of a society regardless of their class, gender, and age. Roderick M. Kramer claims that anyone can achieve heroic qualities if they possess the courage and willpower to overcome their plight. He defines one's desire for a new identity as "identity aspirations" (263) and recognizes their struggle and willpower as "existential courage" (263). In this ever-changing world, people are always striving to achieve new identities in hopes of a better life, and Kramer claims that it is "the willingness to confront and master one's fears and anxieties in the face of an uncertain and dangerous unfolding moment" (264) which makes a person a hero. However, people do not address these courageous acts as heroism since these acts remain unnoticed by the general mass, and, as "identity aspiration" is a self-pursuit, people hardly sympathize with the hero.

Similarly, Franco, Blau, and Zimbardo introduce the notion of "social heroism" where they mention courage and bravery as two dominant features of heroism and suggest that people who overcome dire circumstances in spite of negative challenges are social heroes. These heroes are moral rebels as well since they try to introduce new ideas which go against the established

community standards and they are seen as a threat to the societal order. Though social heroes do not lose their lives like martial or civil heroes, they face financial crisis, lose their social status, or get ostracized from society for their nontraditional choices. However, people often do not show their appreciation towards these unconventional heroes since they mostly engage in risky tasks like challenging social norms.

The patriarchal society of Bangladesh mostly rejects Biranganas as war heroines since they are women, and associates their heroic acts with negative connotations by defining them as unorthodox and bizarre. But Judith Butler's theory of "gender performativity" states that gender is a social construction and it works "through the limitation, prohibition, regulation, control, and even 'protection' of individuals" (3). Through the exercise of political and linguistic power, society has established the gender binary and has imposed it on individuals. Men and women carry out distinct gender roles not because of their instincts, but rather because they perform them consciously. Hence, one's behavior and actions cannot be defined as feminine, masculine, or unconventional. The theoretical frameworks regarding identity construction and heroism mentioned above show that both the notions of one's identity and heroism are socially constructed ideas which can be challenged if needed. Thus, this paper argues that the Biranganas from the three texts under study can be presented as heroes by re-examining their identity as fallen women.

Rizia Rahman (1939-2019) is one of the most prolific writers in Bangla literature who has effortlessly captured both history and culture in her writing. Her excellent narrations have earned her many awards including the Bangla Academy Literary Award, Anannya Literature Award, and Ekushey Padak. In 2016, her fourth novel *Rokter Okkhor* (1978) was translated by Arunava Sinha into English as *Letters of Blood* and published by Bengal Lights Book, Dhaka.

Letters of Blood has garnered Rahman both praise and criticism as she chose it as a vessel to portray the plight of prostitutes trapped in a brothel named Golapipatti. The novel traces the life of its protagonist, Yasmin, a Birangana, whom the patriarchal society turns into a Barangana (whore). Rahman portrays the everyday struggle of Yasmin along with many other prostitutes who try to break free from the clutches of that hellish brothel.

Shaheen Akhtar (b. 1962) is a prolific literary author of Bangla writing. In 2004, she published her novel *Talaash*, where she depicts the lives and sufferings of Biranganas in great detail, the intricate narration of which won it the Prothom Alo Best Book Award in the same year. It was translated into English as *The Search* by Ella Dutta in 2011, published by Zubaan, Delhi. The Korean translation of *Talaash* won the 3rd Asian Literary Award on November 1, 2020. *The Search* lets us peek into the lives of Biranganas such as Mariam, Anuradha, Tuki, and shows what these women had to go through during the war and how they survived in a liberated Bangladesh as fallen women where they neither had any place of their own nor any agency, but they surely possessed the courage that was necessary to go on with their lives.

Dilruba Z. Ara (b. 1957) is a Bangladeshi Anglophone writer based in Sweden who portrays the socio-cultural aspects of her motherland through writing. Her short stories have been published in several international anthologies and they are taught as course materials in different universities around the globe as well. Her novel *Blame*, published in 2015 by The University Press Limited, narrates the journey of a teenage girl named Laila who belongs to an orthodox Muslim Chittagonian family but breaks the shackles of her family traditions to join the liberation struggle along with her Hindu friend Gita. Through Laila and Gita, *Blame* portrays all those war heroines who once fought for their country in 1971, and later had to fight a long battle for their own identity as the Biranganas became pariahs in their own country.

The next chapter, comprising the literature review, contains the assessment of the literary research that helps this paper to prove its argument. Some of the articles describe women's participation in war and how they were treated in the post-liberated country. A few articles focus on the aftermath of sexual violence, the trauma caused by it, and the process of healing the psychological wound which evaluates if the Biranganas' traumatic experiences were properly addressed or not. While some resources focus on the portrayal of Biranganas through media discourses, and manifest their resistance and resilience, the rest of the sources discuss the different notions of heroism.

The two chapters following the literature review present the main argument of the study. The third chapter, named "1971 and Beyond," discusses Rizia Rahman's *Letters of Blood* and Shaheen Akhtar's *The Search* to show how Biranganas were seen as whores throughout the country and they were pushed towards prostitution by the society. The portrayal of Mariam, Yasmin, and Anuradha demonstrates how women are treated in the same humiliating manner both within their community as well as in the brothels. Reading both the texts using the theory of "social constructionism" makes it evident how society has shaped the identity of the Biranganas as fallen women. However, the chapter also focuses on their resistance, courage, resilience, and willpower, thereby tracing the Biranganas' heroism too.

Chapter Four, titled "Herstory of the 1971 War — A Gender Game," analyzes Dilruba Z. Ara's *Blame* using Butler's theoretical concept of "gender performativity" to examine why and how the Biranganas, who were both freedom fighters and sexual victims, were reduced to perpetrators and whores only instead of being acclaimed as the national heroes of the country. As the chapter evaluates Laila and Gita's performance in the liberation struggle against the

traditional portrayal of ideal women, it reveals that gender identity and gender roles are nothing but social constructions. Therefore, it concludes that these women are heroic figures.

Chapter Five concludes this study and puts all the previous arguments together to demonstrate that it is the patriarchal view of women that identified Biranganas as fallen women. The country, which miserably failed to address the trauma of its rape survivors, let alone rehabilitate them, turned its war heroines into victims through deliberate, repetitive victim-blaming. Yasmin, Mariam, Anuradha, Tuki, Laila, and Gita are women characters from the three novels whose wartime experience and journey as Biranganas follow a common pattern of humiliation, marriage, ostracism, and struggle, but each life tells a different story. Hence, it shows that the country was wrong to homogenize the experiences and outcomes of these Birangana women. The chapter concludes by identifying the Biranganas as heroes.

It is evident that Biranganas are largely labeled as the fallen ones due to their loss of honor (as defined by a patriarchal society), so society wants to retain its purity by keeping these fallen women out of the picture. Hence, this paper aims to nullify the identity of Birangana as a fallen woman by demonstrating identity and gender as a social construct as well as attempt to reconstruct their identity as heroes by tracing their resistance, courage, and willpower which are the true attributes of heroism.

Chapter Two

Literature Review

Bangladesh, a country deeply rooted in patriarchy, mostly remembers Biranganas as sexual victims. Besides, the phallocentric narratives of war present men as the savior of the country while ignoring women's contributions and depicting them largely as docile victims of sexual abuse. Hence, this paper focuses on establishing the identity of the Birangana as a heroic figure. However, the existing body of research mostly discusses women's role in the war and their plight as victims of sexual violence while ignoring the heroic tales of their survival.

Women's contribution to our Liberation War is largely measured by their loss of honor and often it is limited to this point as well, while the various other vital roles played by them remain ignored. In “The Participation of Women in the Liberation War of Bangladesh in 1971: A Historical Analysis,” Bhuiyan and Dipu debunk the image of war heroines as rape victims only. Bhuiyan and Dipu present a clear depiction of women's contribution in political affairs since 1952, the Language Movement, which continued during the Liberation War as well. They point out that it's not only men who participated in frontal war but many women joined the Mukti Bahini as well. Several cultural programs were broadcasted through radio including “Bangladesher Mukti Juddhe Sangshkritik Potovumi” and “Ronagone Banglar Nari” (218) to boost the freedom fighters' psychological strength, and most of the performers were women. Various female political figures traveled abroad trying to create global consciousness in favor of Bangladesh. In the UK Bengali woman migrants raised funds to provide support. Ordinary women took on the role of squealers including the female sex workers. Women along with men used to print and distribute secret leaflets, magazines including the newspaper “Muktijuddho”

(219). Uncountable number of women provided medical care in temporary hospitals and refugee camps. Women all over the country including minor ethnic groups provided food and shelter for the freedom fighters, and in return their houses were burned, families were massacred and they got raped. This article gives a profound idea of women's role in Bangladesh's Liberation War, but they did not receive their due respect in post-liberation Bangladesh and most of them are remembered as victims of sexual violence only.

Another article of Dipu's, titled "War Heroines of 1971 Bangladesh: How They are Treated in our Society," demonstrates how history has almost erased the tale of women from the context of the 1971 Liberation War. Dipu mentions that the state's negligence towards war heroines is reflected in the lack of information available regarding them. Though there were more than 200 female freedom fighters who fought in the frontal war, only two women received the "Bir Protik" title, and four women were acknowledged as martyrs in "Smriti 1971" published by the Bangla Academy (463). The rest of their heroic tales remain unnoticed. Dipu states that since war is often linked with the vigilance of men and ours is a patriarchal society, naturally as the weaker sex, women's roles in the war are taken as small gestures and duties. This article explains why the tales of war heroines' heroism remain unnarrated, but their victimhood, helplessness, and sufferings get portrayed on repeat.

Quail in her article, "Who is Speaking? Co-option, Authority, and Envisioning the Nation: Women and Narratives of Sexual Violence in Conflict," focuses on the authorial power of discourses over the voices of sexual victims. Quail claims that, in the initial period of Bangladesh's independence, journalists or scholars have often imposed their own voices over the narrations of sexual victims for ulterior motives, and some of them wrote their pieces without even directly speaking with any of the actual rape victims. Instead, they collected information

from government and NGO officials and homogenized the experiences of Biranganas. Quail mentions that the number of rape victims, abortions, and war babies are not consistent in all the newspapers and often exaggerated, but one thing that remains unchanged everywhere is the portrayal of the Biranganas as helpless victims. She also states that though the government granted them the title “Birangana” and introduced several rehabilitation programs to honor and help them, at the same time they also addressed these women as passive victims through propaganda such as “Help rehabilitate distressed women” (46). In this process, the Biranganas’ voices were overpowered and silenced by the state too. This article demonstrates how the Birangana’s image as solely a victim has been etched in public memory through these discourses formed in the initial period of independence.

However, it is not only the fault of the state and government officials that the public memory remembers war heroines as rape victims only. Visual mass media such as film is responsible for it as well. Gayen, in her article “Women, War and Cinema: Construction of Women in the Liberation War Films of Bangladesh,” examines 26 full-length and 7 short films of the Bangladesh Liberation War to explore women's roles in them. She states that films as ideological state apparatus always portray women through meek, feminine, victimized characters. Gayen also demonstrates that the only pre-liberation war film projected the image of ideal women who remained within the four walls. The post-liberation films till 1975 presented women outside of their household as nurses, lovers, resisting figures but never as freedom fighters or heroes. Besides, these films commercialized rape scenes as they presented erotic, close, and long shots of sexual violence. After 1995, the portrayal of rape scenes diminished, but the Biranganas were shown committing suicide since they were impure, fallen women. Gayen critiques the recent films which portray women as freedom fighters, but in the end they attempt

suicide, or live with schizophrenia, if not married and saved by a man. This article shows how films have constructed the image of Biranganas as solely rape victims by denying their agency.

Literary texts also played a vital role in establishing the image of the Birangana in Bangladeshi society, but they are so few in number that they go unnoticed. “Bangladesh,” an article authored by Mohua and Mowtushi, discusses the importance of Bangladeshi literary texts translated into English for a global audience. They address the 1971 Liberation War as a major theme of Bangladeshi literature while mentioning *Talaash* and *Rokter Okkhor* as two important books which do not portray the Birangana through the lens of the victim only. They elaborate on Rizia Rahman’s *Rokter Okkhor*, translated into English as *Letters of Blood*, to be one of the first fiction to criticize the victimization of the Birangana. Mohua and Mowtushi claim that *Letters of Blood* portrays the rage and rebelliousness of the Biranganas, along with condemning the state for failing to address their trauma and silencing their voices instead. The article recognizes *Letters of Blood* as an important fiction that tells the tale of a Birangana who is not a passive victim. However, until recently, most of the audience failed to notice this and for them it narrated the lives of fallen women and prostitutes only.

The trauma and sufferings of war heroines shown in both mainstream and mass media are not purely fictional. But it is not necessary that they would have to bear these sufferings throughout their lives. As the article “Healing the Psychological Wounds of Gender-Related Violence in Latin America: A Model for Gender-Sensitive Work in Post-Conflict Contexts,” written by Leslie, shows that it is possible for traumatized rape victims of war to go back to their normal selves. Though Leslie discusses the process of healing psychological wounds in regard to Latin America, it is applicable universally. She mentions the importance of joining social movements since it enables the traumatized women to share their collective experiences and feel

a shared bond. Giving testimony is another way of combating the trauma, Leslie says, since silence makes women feel disempowered and guilty. She also acknowledges the importance of professional counseling and financial empowerment. All of the points that this article makes as ways of psychological wound healing seem valid in the case of the Birangana as well. However, providing professional counseling to rape victims on a large scale seems impossible in terms of third-world countries like Bangladesh, which Leslie also admits in her article.

Similarly, Berk in her article “When the Body Becomes a Battlefield: Genocidal Rape and Trauma in Shaheen Akhtar's *The Search*” analyzes Akhtar’s novel *The Search* using Judith Lewis Herman’s theory of trauma to inspect the recovery and rehabilitation process of the Birangana. Berk mentions that every symptom of PTSD caused by the trauma of rape is present in the victims of *The Search* which Herman in her theory discusses. She also states that a safe environment, chances to remember and narrate the agonizing memories, and forming a reconnection to everyday life are essential for sexual victims to overcome their traumas. But the tendency of silencing the sexual victims is prominent in the context of post-liberation Bangladesh, which is also reflected in Akhtar’s novel *The Search*. The article shows how the silencing of Birangana and people's lack of empathy towards them made their life more difficult in spite of their continuous fight to live a normal life.

Though the war heroines of Bangladesh could not access psychological counseling, the government of this newly formed country established Rehabilitation Centers for women within one week of independence and adopted several schemes to rehabilitate them. The book chapter, “The Biranganas (War Heroines) in Bangladesh: Generative Resilience of Sexual Violence in Conflict through Graphic Ethnography” penned by Nayanika Mookherjee focuses on the resilience of the Biranganas and the steps taken by the government to ensure their rehabilitation.

Mookherjee states that after rescuing the women from military camps and bunkers, they were given immediate medical treatments and abortions were performed, while the newborn war babies were sent abroad for adoption. The rehabilitation program tried to bring resilience to the Biranganas by marrying them off, and this scheme was supported by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. However, while men demanded dowry, women showed their disinterest in marriage. Instead, they asked for jobs. Mookherjee mentions that women were given various kinds of training based on their prior education and social class so that they could gain financial independence. Not all the Biranganas chose to commit suicide. Some of them, mostly lower-class women, returned to their families, and the rest of them fought to remain alive. This article shows that Biranganas are not passive rape victims as they have been portrayed. Rather they are heroes as they believed in self-sufficiency and independence.

However, it was not easy for the war heroines to live an unhindered, respectable life within a patriarchal and conservative setting like Bangladesh. Mookherjee, who resided 8 months in Enayetpur for her extensive research on Biranganas, mentions in her book chapter, “Subjectivities of War Heroines: Victim, Agent, Traitor?” that even the human rights activists never focused on the “complexities that necessitated the survival strategies” (229) of Biranganas. She reveals that, according to the masses, a real Birangana is she who remains silent regarding her shameful experiences, and women who chose to break the silence were labeled as traitors. Even many male government officials and rehabilitation workers expressed that the vocal Biranganas’ experiences are not worth taking into account since they are “fokirnis” [beggars] (230) who are shameless enough to share their shameful experiences. Mookherjee also states that in post-war Bangladesh women were looked down upon for being artistes or performers as these professions seem improper, and people claimed that the mass sexual violence made women

promiscuous. Mookherjee's article reveals how the agents of patriarchy twisted the already struggling Biranganas' survival strategies and presented them as shameless traitors, if not victims, instead of acknowledging their courage and strength.

Similarly, Biswas and Tripathi in their article, "The Blame Game: War and Violence in Dilruba Z. Ara's *Blame*," criticize the sexist definition of war heroes portrayed in *Blame* that glorifies the men for being freedom fighters and condemns women for their courage which seems unwomanly and inappropriate in a patriarchal society. They argue that since women are supposed to follow the traditional rule and stay out of political matters, women like Laila and Gita get blamed when they go against the patriarchal norms to join men in the formation of the country as it contradicts their gender role. Though these women are called Birangana or brave women, society sees them as polluted and fallen ones. Moreover, they claim that due to this patriarchal mindset these polluted women are not accepted into their families. Instead, they get blamed for being sexual victims. They suffer from identity crisis and alienation, which makes their rehabilitation even harder. This article lets us peek through the psyche of a patriarchal society where women are always blamed for their nontraditional choices, and ostracized for being sexual victims.

After many years of independence, Bangladesh formed a tribunal to punish the war criminals and, in the process, the Biranganas' testimonies began to be collected. But as Saikia mentions in her book chapter, "Victims' Memories" that these documents also present the Birangana's entire being as "captured and frozen within the moment of rape" (154). So she dedicates this chapter to portray how they survived in the liberated country. Through her extensive interviews with war heroines, she shows that in spite of being ostracized these women chose to live. She shares the urge of a war baby to embrace her identity and live a respectful life.

While recognizing her interviewees as brave women, Saikia revoices their questions as to why they are identified as victims only when they are trying their best to create new identities and make lives of their own. The extensive interviews presented in this chapter show that Biranganas are by no means victims. They are true heroes who kept adopting numerous strategies in spite of countless failures to shed their identity of a sexual victim in order to live a decent life.

A society that considers its women as secondary citizens always puts the burden of shame on them too. Skjelsbæk in her article, “Victim and Survivor: Narrated Social Identities of Women Who Experienced Rape During the War in Bosnia-Herzegovina” portrays rape as a weapon of war for ethnic cleansing. She discusses the wartime experiences of Bosnian rape victims (women), and their lives both before and after the almost four-year-long war. The five interviewees had somewhat similar experiences in the concentration camps. They were gang-raped over 50 times a month. Though these women were accepted by their families, they could not live a normal life like before since they suffered from PTSD. Many of them refused to marry and the married women avoided having sex with their husbands. Skjelsbæk also points out that these women did not receive any help or compensation from the state though families received money for their sons who died in that war. Though the interviewees chose to remain alive, they said their lives were hard. Still, they think of themselves as survivors, not victims, but the society doesn't think alike. This article shows that the women of Bosnia-Herzegovina suffered the same vicious consequences of war as the women of Bangladesh in 1971. It is evident that women tend to be the typical target of sexual violence all around the world, and these women are victimized everywhere though they think of themselves as survivors.

It is evident that survivors are often described as helpless victims, nevertheless people who overcome their adverse situations in spite of challenging circumstances are rendered as

underdogs and survivors are one of them. The book chapter named “Underdogs as Heroes,” written by Vandello, Goldschmied, and Michniewicz, discusses the characteristics of the underdogs that make them equivalent to a hero. The authors describe underdogs as socially disadvantaged people who fight against the advantaged ones though their chances of winning remain very low. People tend to sympathize with underdogs since they resist the injustices of society, but they hardly show their support in favor of these fighters in public as they go against the social order. Moreover, the authors claim that the heroism of underdogs does not lie in their success, rather it lies in their efforts to overcome the obstacles. It is their spirit of resistance, bravery, and willpower that makes them heroes. The article helps us to identify Biranganas as underdogs and it supports the primary argument of the paper that Birangonas are not mere victims, but heroes.

However, the debate of gender discrimination remains prevalent in the discussion of heroism too. The article, “What makes a hero? Theorising the Social Structuring of Heroism” authored by Frisk discusses the definition of heroism and how it has evolved over time. Frisk argues that though the heroic figures were found only in folklore, myths, and religious texts in earlier times, literature that has emerged since the 1980s tries to locate heroism in everyday life actions. However, the absence of women as heroic figures is notable from earlier times till now. Frisk states that heroism has always been associated with masculinity and powerful female characters have been presented as goddesses, seductresses, and mother figures only. Heroes are typically presented with masculine virtues, and in warfare heroism has always been connected with physical strength. Literature and public discourses celebrate male heroism in the context of warfare and nation-building, so women are not given any heroic attributes since they lack the stereotypical masculine traits. The article shows that though the definition of heroism has

evolved over time it could not overcome the gender barriers yet since the social construction of heroism still tends to eliminate women as possible candidates of heroic figures.

Likewise, Harrington in her article “Women and Resistance in West Bengal and Bangladesh: 1967-1971” discusses the gendered politics in warfare. She states that women are often denied the spot of heroes as if the heroism of these females would emasculate their male counterparts. Patriarchy has always tried to confine women within boundaries and the battlefield is no different. Harrington mentions that many female warriors fought in the 1971 war by disguising themselves as men since the male camp leaders and soldiers did not want women to fight and said they should stay at home. The narrative of Bangladesh's independence war is phallocentric since it glorifies men as Muktiyoddha and victimizes women as Birangana. The heroic activities of the Muktiyoddha are always set against the shame and helplessness of the Birangana. Testimonies show that several batches of women fighters took training and fought in the war, but nowhere in history are they mentioned today. The national discourse remembers the shame of Biranganas only, and not their valor. Even in the fictions, Muktiyoddhas are always associated with physical strength, rationality, and heroism while Biranganas are portrayed through hysterical laughter, irrationality, and victimhood. This article shows how the phallocentric narratives deny women their heroic identities and portray them solely as victims in a patriarchal setting.

The existing body of literary studies mentioned above shows how Biranganas have been portrayed as victims throughout the history of the 1971 Liberation War by several mediums, and their heroic tales have been marginalized in this process. But these women are truly heroic figures no matter what since they very much possess the courage and vigor which are true attributes of heroism.

Chapter Three

1971 and Beyond

I assess the power of a will
by how much resistance, pain, torture it endures
and knows how to turn to its advantage.
- Friedrich Nietzsche.

Bangladesh, like most other countries of the world, practices patriarchy as its social system. In a patriarchal society, women generally do not possess the same benefits as men since patriarchy gives men the utmost priority while limiting women's rights and authority, which often makes the females subordinate to their male counterparts. Honor codes of a patriarchal society, like the rest of its other norms, differ in terms of gender. While men's honor lies in courage, physical strength, and authority, women's honor is linked with "sexual purity, modesty, decorum in dress and discretion in social relations, particularly with men" (Christianson et al. 1). Hence, a grave amount of importance is given to the virginity of women as it is synonymous to their honor. It is seen as a sign of masculinity when a man loses his virginity, but in terms of women, it is considered as the most shameful experience. So women must protect their virginity to uphold the honor of their family as well as the entire community in which they live. If they lose their chastity the society ostracizes them by constructing their identity as fallen women. But why do the same people take on different identities under different circumstances? Because one's identity is not innate since humans are not born with specific identities, rather it is the society that constructs one's identity and imposes it on them. This chapter focuses on

investigating the process in which the Bangladeshi patriarchal society has shaped the identity of Biranganas as fallen women by discussing Rizia Rahman's *Letters of Blood* and Shaheen Akhtar's *The Search* while trying to locate the heroism that lies in their resistance against all odds that society exerted on them.

Both *Letters of Blood* and *The Search* have one thing in common: their portrayal of the lives of Biranganas in a liberated Bangladesh. The narrative of *Letters of Blood*, set in the year 1978, tells the story of a Birangana named Yasmin who lives on the periphery of her society. Through the depiction of Yasmin, Rahman shows how and why many Biranganas of Bangladesh became "Baranganas" [whores] (Rahman 90) within a few years of independence, and it was their very own community that compelled these women to accept the fate of a fallen woman. Similarly, *The Search*, set against the backdrop of the Bangladesh Liberation War, recounts the experiences of Biranganas; the crude sexual violence that they had to go through during the War, and the betrayal that they received from the society of a liberated Bangladesh. However, both the books not only portray Biranganas' plight but also exhibit their resilience, courage, and hope for a new identity and better future.

Predicament of the Birangana: Victim, Prostitute or a Hero?

Letters of Blood is one of the first novels to condemn the stigmatization of wartime rape survivors as well as the presence of prostitution in our society. Yasmin, the protagonist of the novel, represents the Biranganas who chose brothels as their last resort since society had shut its doors against them. Yasmin though, unlike other prostitutes, takes customers only when she needs to earn the monthly rent for her shanty. She neither has any ambition for her future nor does she compete with other prostitutes for customers which is a typical scenario of brothels. It

shows that Yasmin is not living her life, but she is simply keeping herself alive since death has not arrived yet. But Yasmin, like any other girl in the society, had dreams once, dreams that were shattered in 1971 as the Pakistani military killed her whole family and dragged her to one of their camps where she was kept for six months to fulfill the lustful desires of “the human beasts in soldiers’ uniforms” (Rahman 86). Once she regained her mental equilibrium she realized that in the newly liberated country she had lost all of her former identities in exchange for a new one named Birangana (or war heroine). But it was clear that the people in her community did not see her as a heroic woman. Rather they implied that she was “not like all other innocent women in society” (Rahman 45) as she had lost her virginity, and therefore, her honor.

A phallogentric society like Bangladesh is hardly willing to distinguish rape from consensual sex. So it does not matter if it is a case of sexual violence or non-consensual sex as the woman who loses her virginity is always punished. She must either choose death or a life full of shame and utmost disrespect that her own society exerts on her and her family. As Yasmin became an orphan in the early period of war no one came to the Rehabilitation Center to look for her though months had passed by since independence. So she herself visited her Chacha (paternal uncle) and confronted him about why he did not look for her. Yasmin’s Chacha was greatly shocked upon seeing his niece alive as he was afraid of the shame that he would have to bear for having a Birangana niece, so he replied that they all thought she was dead. And Yasmin retorted, “Look, Chacha, not everyone dies. Some are forced to live with their memories of torment” (Rahman 88). It was not only her Chacha, but her Mama (maternal uncle) who also treated her in the same manner. He too shut his door against Yasmin saying “You don’t have a very good reputation in the society now” (Rahman 96). Both her Chacha and Mama’s

remarks reflect how Biranganas were seen as nothing but fallen women who had lost their chastity, and it was the fear of losing one's reputation that made them cruel enough to banish their own family member only because she bore the identity of sexual victims.

Yasmin was determined to put on a fight against the social prejudices, so, instead of seeking shelter in her Chacha or Mama's house, she started looking for a job that would help her to survive on her own. As Yasmin had passed the MA Preliminaries before the 1971 war, she was hopeful of landing a job. But soon she realized that she was wrong. Her past education or her current skills were given no value in the job market and "she had only one identity to use as her asset everywhere", the identity of a Birangana (Rahman 89). The people at interview boards did not see her as an interviewee. Instead, they asked her about the six months of torture that she went through at the concentration camp. Yasmin realized that people are unconcerned about her life before and after the rape as if "her entire being is captured and frozen within the moment of rape" (Saikia 154), and nothing else mattered. Hence Yasmin stopped looking for jobs as she understood that the people at the interview boards were only "inquisitive about" (Rahman 90) her horrific experience of wartime rape, and she would never be able to earn her livelihood with respect since she was a mere whore in everybody's eyes. But Yasmin was not associated with impurity only. People described her as mad too. Harrington mentions that the Birangana figure "suddenly appears hysterical, and therefore illogical" (20) to the people around her. Yasmin's resistance against the socially imposed identity of a fallen woman made her life more miserable as people called her mad, and she uttered while reflecting on it "Pakistani soldiers damaged my body. And you people are damaging my mind" (Rahman 90). Most of the war narratives portray

Biranganas as mentally unstable, and it is not entirely fabricated, because it is the society's unempathetic nature towards the trauma of these sexual victims that deranged them.

Marriage is considered to be a significant way of restoring the lost honor of sexual victims and rehabilitating them in society. A fallen woman can regain her former position within the community only after a man accepts her as his wife. So in hopes of rehabilitation, Yasmin agreed to marry a man who promised her a new life. But soon she realized that it was a marriage of convenience since he had married Yasmin for monetary gains only. The man took possession of Yasmin's father's house and sold it. Moreover, he "bartered her body for business contracts, becoming rich" (Rahman 95). Her husband, like the rest of the society, saw her as a fallen woman, undeserving of the identity of a respected wife. When Yasmin refused to obey his vicious demands and confronted him for his lowly acts, he crushed her resistance by saying, "If you could sleep with the Punjabi rouges, why not all this?" (Rahman 95). Yasmin's husband's inhuman acts manifest how the society of Bangladesh had miserably failed to sympathize with the trauma of the Biranganas. They could not identify these women as anything else but prostitutes since they had sexual intercourse with uncountable men. They failed to realize that it was sexual violence since these women did not give their consent. Yet Yasmin showed resistance against the demands of her husband, saying "If the war has really turned me into a whore ... I'll become a real one" (Rahman 96). Out of her utmost hatred towards the society that failed to rehabilitate her, Yasmin came to the brothel of Golapipatti. One might see this as a failure on Yasmin's part, but it was her way of showing resistance against the patriarchal society as, according to Mohua and Mowtushi, many Biranganas "turned to voluntary prostitution not only out of desperation, but also out of sheer anger and resentment" (536). The anger and

resentment is evident in Yasmin's case too since she could have continued being a wife or an employee at an office by ignoring the ill-treatment and insults of society, but she decided not to.

As Berger and Luckmann recognize "identity as a social phenomenon" (95), that makes us see ourselves through the eyes of society, Yasmin too, despite her utmost resistance, started seeing herself as a mere whore after living a few years in Golapipatti. Delwar Hussain, a journalist who used to visit Golapipatti regularly, spoke of injustice and independence to Yasmin, but Yasmin denied her rights over any of these as she replied "I am not a human being I am one of the women in this brothel" (Rahman 97). Yasmin failed to identify herself as a human being anymore as she could not relate to her "subjective reality" (Berger and Luckmann 183) and accepted the identity of a fallen woman that society imposed on her. Yasmin was not the only one who accepted her socially imposed identity. Most of the women of the brothel saw themselves through the eyes of society and they considered themselves as sinful and unworthy of a better life. But none of them chose prostitution as their profession voluntarily. Some of the women were abducted and sold, some were tricked into this business, while there were many rape survivors and Biranganas like Yasmin who were tossed into this darkness by the societal system. Many of these women tried to deny the imposed identity of fallen women, but often they could not do so.

Yasmin eventually learned to see herself as a human being once again, and she tried to ignite this thought among the other women of Golapipatti too. But the women initially refused to show resistance against the existing societal order since they knew it was almost impossible to break through the system and they would not be accepted as part of the society by other women, let alone the men because "Once you're branded, it never comes off" (Rahman 65). Yet, Yasmin

succeeded, and she instilled hope of a new life among many of the prostitutes at Golapipatti and taught them to revolt against the societal order, but she was barred once again by the same societal order in a counterattack. Yasmin paid, with her own life, the price for bringing in the revolution to the brothel. As Berger and Luckmann mention, when there is a collision between one's "social identity" and "subjective real identity," "obviously a society will supply therapeutic mechanisms to take care of such 'abnormal' cases" (188). In cases of the Biranganas like Yasmin, the society deals with them by ostracizing or by killing them if necessary.

Yasmin might not be recognized as a hero by many, but she proved her heroism by revolting repeatedly against the unjust patriarchal orders. She tried to bring a social reform. According to Franco, Blau, and Zimbardo, people who possess the courage to stand up against social injustices in spite of the threat of danger are "moral rebels" (101). Hence Yasmin is a "moral rebel." However, as social heroism deals with defying societal orders and bringing in revolutionary social reforms people often refrain themselves from associating with these kinds of acts due to their risky nature. Besides, these acts of heroism take place in "private rather than public settings" (101) hence they remain unnoticed. Yasmin's courageous act is seen as a threat against the societal order too. As society always tries to eliminate the possible threats, it firmly refuses to accept these not so common acts of Biranganas as heroism.

The Search

Shaheen Akhtar's *The Search* captures the casualties of war, mainly the incidents of wartime rape and how they have scarred the sexual victims, or Biranganas, for life. Mariam, the protagonist of the novel, represents the plights of uncountable faceless Biranganas whom the society remembered only as fallen women, and turned a blind eye to their struggles.

Mariam alias Mary, like many other Biranganas, met the same fate of a sexual victim who had lost her honor. But according to Mariam, her misfortune began even before the year of the war. She was in class 10 when she went to a cinema hall one day with one of her distant relatives named Jashimul Haque. Her movie adventure was kept a secret from her parents, of course. But they were noticed together by a villager. For three days they wandered on the streets out of utmost terror. “Coming home was the fall from paradise for this young girl” (Akhtar 18) as the rumors had spread like wildfire, tainting Mariam’s image. Unable to marry her off, Mariam’s father sent her to Dhaka with her little brother where she continued her higher education. It was in the middle of March 1971, when Mariam sent her brother home so he would be safe from the turmoil of the upcoming war. Hence, the lone Mariam followed her neighbors and left Dhaka by crossing the Buriganga river on the morning of March 27. That aimless journey brought her to the other side of the river Padma where she took shelter in an abandoned house named Shargadham (Paradise). In a patriarchal society, a woman must remain “always under men’s guardianship” (Beauvoir 114), so questions were raised against Mariam since she was all alone. The other women at the shelter accused her of luring their husbands and claimed that “Mary is a whore” (Akhtar 54). These incidents give us an account of the stereotypical view of women that the agents of patriarch generally possess in which, unfortunately, women too are complicit.

Mariam leaves Shargadham paradise and reaches Notungaon where she is captured by the Pakistani military. Her journey as a rape victim continues from one concentration camp to another until she is rescued by the Mukti Bahini only a few days before the declaration of independence. Mariam, like many other rape survivors, spends three long months in a

Rehabilitation Center. After being released from there, she comes home with her father, Kafiluddin Ahmed who thought, “It would have been better if the daughter had not lived, instead of living like this” (Akhtar 207). As he was ashamed of being the father of a Birangana, he tried to reinstate the family honor by marrying Mariam off to her cousin Saju whom he once considered to be an “abnormal creature” (Akhtar 210) for his mental instability. Akhtar, in her novel, compares a woman’s life to a four-wheeled vehicle with her body being the driver. She says, “If the vehicle veers an inch away from the road paved with customs and rules, then it crashes into the rubbish heap. Life has fallen. She becomes a fallen woman” (4). Marriage is the only way of rehabilitating the rape survivors in a society and restoring their honor that the agents of patriarchy can think of. Similar to the circumstances of Yasmin from *Letters of Blood*, Mariam’s family also preferred her death over a shameful life. Mariam, unwilling to marry Saju, storms out of the house and does not come back since she knew her father would attempt to kill her out of sheer anger and shame. So she had no other choice but to leave her house and family behind.

It was not only the families of Biranganas but also the government that tried to marry off these shunned women in order to bring them back within the social boundaries. The government promised a fixed amount of dowry to the grooms who would willingly marry Biranganas. But marriage was not a solution for these traumatized women. They had hardly forgotten the nightmarish experiences of the concentration camp so the very idea of being with a man in the same room made them shudder in fear. Hence, the Biranganas who refused to get married “instead demanded jobs from the state as part of their rehabilitation” (Mookherjee, “The Biranganas,” 155). Mariam was one of them. But she went to her former lover Abed and asked

him to give her a job. Abed Jahangir, who had impregnated Mariam in 1971 but refused to marry her despite her numerous pleadings, expected that Mariam, the Birangana, would come to him “like a bitch repeatedly to lick the feet of the man. This girl had not come like that” (Akhtar 223). As Mookherjee explains, the people of Bangladesh remembers Biranganas “through the *bhoyonkor drishsho* (horrific scene) marked by her ‘dishevelled hair,’ ‘her loud laughter,’ or her ‘quietness,’ ‘muteness’; she was ‘the one who stares into space’ with ‘deadened-eyes’” (“The Biranganas,” 148). Hence, Abed could not digest the fact that Mariam had come to him to ask for a job, and not for his love or shelter. So Abed decides to teach Mariam a lesson by sending her to jail since she had hurt his ego, though his plan results in failure. Having no job to support herself and no place to stay, Mariam returns to the Rehabilitation Center.

Mariam, a girl raised in a patriarchal family, could not ignore the prospect of marriage as a way of rehabilitation for too long. So, in 1973, she left the house at New Eskaton Road, which sheltered the working Biranganas, to marry Momtaz whom she thought to be “a liberal man” (Akhtar 242). But occasionally Momtaz reminded her that she was still a Birangana. Mariam left her job since it was a condition of the marriage because, according to Momtaz, the men at her office “wouldn’t care if she had a husband at home or not. They would demand extras” (Akhtar 245). No maid was allowed within the house too because Momtaz feared gossip. He said the maid would spread the rumor that a Birangana lives in this house and people would come in flocks to see the dishonored woman of 1971. As Awwad mentions, the members of a community spread unpleasant truths about certain families that their reputation has been damaged and in cases like this “Gossip then becomes a tool to remind the family of its shame” (45). As Mariam was well aware of the consequences of gossip, she thought that her husband

was trying to save her reputation, so she complied with Momtaz. Yet, she could not have a normal married life since it was not easy for a rape survivor like Mariam to make love with a man even if he was her husband. As Skjelsbæk mentions, it is difficult for rape survivors to partake in sexual activities and one of her interviewees stated that “I suffer a lot because of the sexual side of our marriage ... all the time I find excuses to avoid having sex” (392). Similarly, Mariam could not take part in sexual activities. Whenever her husband took her to bed the memories of sexual torture flashed through her mind and her “eyes bulged like the eyes of a dead fish.... She began breathing through her mouth and her heart thrashed like a little rat” (Akhtar 245). Moreover, she could not deny her husband’s demands out of fear. Momtaz found her traumatized behavior to be prostitute-like. So he called her a whore, raped and tortured her every day like the Pakistani army. Like Yasmin, Mariam’s marriage also results in failure since both of their husbands could not see them as anything else but whores. So Mariam leaves Momtaz in search of a new identity.

The rehabilitation of rape survivors in a patriarchal society is not easy. Society barred the Biranganas from living a healthy life since, as fallen women, they were not welcomed within its boundaries. Many women took their own lives in the concentration camp as they could not bear the tortures anymore. There were countless Biranganas who committed suicide after independence too. As Mariam says to Mukti, a young researcher, during her interview, “I did not think about suicide. I used to think about living. I thought of suicide after the war” (Akhtar 90). Biragonas who chose death over life did so due to the acute shame of losing honor that was imposed on them by society. But not all Biranganas chose death. Many chose to live, and they all showed resistance in their own ways. One of them is Anuradha, who wants to “keep a prison

diary like Anne Frank” (Akhtar 114). She thinks that the tales of her tortures will testify to both her struggles and strength and she would become a part of the 1971 Liberation War history. She never thinks of suicide, but wants to live as evidence of the cruelty that rape survivors had to face because of the war. Little did she know that the country would remember her as a rape victim and fallen woman only while overlooking her courage and resistance. Hence, Anuradha’s dream of becoming another Anne Frank remained as a dream only since she could not voice her wartime experiences. Her father abandoned her out of shame, and the society ostracized her as it considered her a whore. Anuradha, who was kept in the same army camp as Yasmin, claimed that she could see the future. She used to say, “Just you watch, they will turn us into a whore” (Akhtar 136). Anuradha, as an educated girl, knew that after the end of a war the country always labels its men as heroes and its women as fallen ones. Anuradha, aware of her fate, still dreamt of a decent life. So she believed a man who promised to get her married but sold her at Faridpur to a brothel. Hence, like Yasmin, Anuradha chose the life of a prostitute. She did not try to come out of prostitution, and neither did she hide her identity as a Birangana. She felt the same rage and hatred towards society as Yasmin. Anuradha, in introducing herself, would say “I’m a Birangana of 1971, educated but a prostitute — these are my sins, grievous sins” (Akhtar 307). The society was so immersed in prejudice and patriarchy that it could not even ensure jobs for these traumatized women, let alone proper rehabilitation, though they were equipped with skills and education that were necessary to earn a living. So joining prostitution was not Anuradha’s desperation to live, but an act of revenge as she wanted to tell the society how miserably it had failed to rehabilitate its “heroic women,” so they became whores in the true sense.

Tuki, another rape survivor who was kept in the same camp as Anuradha and Mariam, lived her entire life fighting alone against social prejudice and injustice. Tuki's family was no different than the others' from *The Search*. Tuki's parents tried to kill her with their own hands as they did not want "this daughter of theirs to live in their society as a dishonoured woman" (Akhtar 351). It is said that the loss of a child is unbearable for the parents, but when the child in question is a Birangana, most of the families choose honor over the lives of their daughters. According to Awwad, our patriarchal social codes instill the idea into us that "honor is more important than a human life, and hence it is necessary to sacrifice human lives, usually innocent women, for the sake of protecting family honor" (47). So when Tuki came back from the brink of death she left her home for Dhaka, and never returned. Being uneducated, she was unable to land any monthly-salaried job. Tuki earned her living by raising chickens, cooking food, and working in garment factories for three decades after the independence of Bangladesh. She never had the chance to become anyone's wife or mother since society imposed the identity of a fallen woman on her. She always believed that she was an ordinary human being like the rest of the people of the society, hence she had the right to live. But her society did not think alike.

Tuki goes to her village after twenty-six years as she wanted to buy some land for her burial ground and farmland. Upon seeing her, the villagers welcomed her saying "Ah Tuki Begum, when did you come from the brothel?" (Akhtar 351). Time might heal one's physical wounds but it cannot restore a woman's honor once it is damaged. The villagers who once accused Tuki of losing her honor and becoming a whore in the year of the war repeated the same actions again, though three decades had passed since then. The villagers refused to sell burial ground to a fallen woman, and those who agreed to sell a piece of farmland asked for double the price. However, despite all the negative associations and ill-treatment, Tuki, unlike Yasmin and

Anuradha, refuses to accept the imposed identity of a fallen woman since losing her virginity “was just the result of abuse” (Akhtar 352), and never once in her life did she have consensual sex. So she firmly believes in her “subjective real identity” of an honorable human being and refuses to give up on her life. She manages to live a decent life in Dhaka despite all of her struggles. Tuki is an “odds beater/underdog” (102) according to Franco, Blau, and Zimbardo, who mention that “Individuals who overcame handicap or adverse conditions and succeed in spite of such negative circumstances” (102) are social heroes. Hence, it is Tuki’s resistance against all odds and her resilience to overcome her adverse situation that testifies to her heroism.

Mariam too tries to attain social rehabilitation through various schemes. After the failure of her marriage, she, with the help of her mother, starts earning her living by sewing clothes. But the “Ma-Meye Tailoring (Mother-Daughter Tailoring)” (Akhtar 276) venture remains an unsuccessful attempt at rehabilitation. As Mariam lived with her mother in their old Rayerbazar home, the neighbors were aware of the fact that she bore the identity of a Birangana. The tailoring business was like an open invitation to them to get a glimpse of the Birangana, so the women who came to her house “pushed aside the clothes with attractive new designs and closely scanned the body ravished by the military” (Akhtar 269). People could not accept Biranganas as normal human beings or as a part of their society. To them, the Birangana figure was a fascinating phenomenon. People used to visit the rehabilitation centers as well as the workplaces pretending to know these rape victims. As Kajalie Shehreen Islam mentions, it was as if “they were on show for the public who came to see them, ... viewing the women war victims as objects on display” (2136). Hence, many Biranganas left their jobs and the rehabilitation homes too since they felt themselves to be abnormal creatures or animals in a zoo. Mariam has a similar experience. Her fantastic sewing ability and the “blisters between her

fingers” (Akhtar 277) could not save Mariam from the curious and disgusted gazes of her customers and neighbors. Though the tailoring business helped the mother-daughter duo earn their living, it could not rehabilitate Mariam since no matter what she did, in society’s eyes she remained a Birangana, a whore.

Though the bodies of the Biranganas were mutilated, their minds remained strong — full of hope and resilience. So they took on different chores in order to fill their stomachs. They sewed clothes, worked for laundries, bakeries, restaurants, and so on. In addition, “They made things from easily available and inexpensive material like bamboo and jute, products of everyday use that helped the war-ravaged economy” (Akhtar 192). But the country never appreciated their effort and contribution. The companies that sold the products produced by Biranganas kept the suppliers’ names hidden from their customers since nobody would want to buy something that came from the rape survivors of 1971. Though some people consumed these produced goods knowing their origin, they did so with disgust as a gatekeeper in one office once asked Mariam, “Could anyone eat meals cooked by those sluts?” (Akhtar 222). So the Biranganas always remained hidden behind a curtain, and if someone dared to come out in public like Mariam, their efforts crumbled down like a house of cards since the society must be kept clean and no fallen woman could be a part of it.

However, Mariam represents all the Biranganas who, like the phoenix, rose again and again from their ashes. Mariam does not give up on life despite several failures, and in 1976 she joins a job at a travel agency with the help of Abed Jahangir. But the job initially could not bring an end to her miseries either. Mariam’s employer, Zaman Shaheb, was never satisfied with her work. She was greatly humiliated in front of the whole office for her smallest mistakes every time. Zaman Shaheb would always remind her that she is a Birangana, saying, “Abed had foisted

a raped woman of 1971 on him” (Akhtar 317), and he kept a fallen woman in his office as an employee only because he was a good man. The identity of a fallen woman chased Biranganas wherever they went. Mariam kept changing her jobs from one travel agency to another but all of her employers treated her in the same way. Only one employer was different, but he demanded that she fulfill his lustful needs. As Mookherjee mentions, Biranganas were never treated with respect and people of all sorts made illicit gestures towards them since they believed that “being raped made women promiscuous” (“Subjectivities,” 234). So everyone demanded “quickie sex” (Akhtar 272) from Mariam as she was a whore in their eyes anyway. Still, Mariam continued with her jobs, and after almost fourteen years of struggle, one day she realized that “the stamp of Birangana had fallen from her body” (Akhtar 320). Roderick M. Kramer recognizes one’s quest for a new identity as “existential courage” and he says “such courage is no less important in today’s rapidly changing and uncertain world than the more usual acts of physical and moral courage which societies so often venerate” (263). Hence, Mariam’s endless struggles to shed her identity of a fallen woman makes her no less than a hero.

Biranganas are treated as social pariahs in the patriarchal social system of Bangladesh. As soon as someone’s identity of being a Birangana is revealed, people start avoiding her as if that woman herself is a contagious disease so they must not come close. Mariam lived the life of a pariah as well since her job and social rehabilitation could not put an end to her loneliness. Mariam, who had only one goal before the war — to become a wife and a mother — had once married Momtaz for social rehabilitation, and the marriage resulted in failure. Later when both her physical and psychological wounds healed, she found herself craving for a companion again. But men who crossed the gate of her house, such as Abed Samir and Abed Jahangir, did not have the intention of marrying a fallen woman, and Mariam knew it too. Mariam thought it was the

absence of a man and the emptiness of her womb that made her feel incomplete. But her days got better after Tuki came to live with her as “Mariam was no longer alone at home. When she came home from office in the evenings, there was someone to open the door with a smile” (Akhtar 340). Mariam craved this very smile, the smile of sympathy, the smile of assurance, which the society deprived her of. As Helen Leslie suggests, it is important for the rape survivors to share their collective experiences with other sexual victims and feel a shared bond which can help them “experience empowerment and establish meaningful relationships” (55) so that their psychological wounds are healed and they can live a healthy, meaningful life. Mariam used to think of the other inmates, especially Anuradha, and at last, she found some sort of peace in the companionship of Tuki, another Birangana. Tuki too found her family and solace in Mariam. It shows what the Biranganas needed to regain their former self was not a man, marriage, or family, but a little acceptance from the society and an empowering environment since they were resilient enough to overcome their trauma.

Society has etched an image of the Birangana in our minds as a victim and she is portrayed as suicidal, mentally unstable, or prostitute-like. But not all Biranganas chose death over life, and some of them wanted their voices to be heard too so they showed their resistance against the patriarchal system in various ways. Yasmin and Anuradha are representatives of all the Biranganas who chose prostitution as a way of avenging their insults against a nation that failed to give them the due respect as war heroines. The portrayal of Mariam and Tuki also reminds us of numerous faceless Biranganas who spent most of their lives in quest of a new identity other than that of a fallen woman. Though society describes Biranganas as mere rape victims, their struggles to come out of the socially constructed identity of fallen women along with their willpower and bravery tell us that they are no less than heroes.

Chapter Four

Herstory of the 1971 War — A Gender Game

She struggles with the forces that would tell her story for her,
 or write her out of the story,
 the genealogy, the rights of man, the rule of law.
 The ability to tell your own story, in words or images,
 is already a victory, already a revolt.

—Rebecca Solnit

War is a gendered phenomenon as it is largely considered to be a male practice. War is often associated with words such as physical strength, power, arms, fight etc. and these words are linked with the established idea of masculinity too. On the contrary, when we think of women and war, the words that generally come to our mind are sexual violence, victim, fallen one, ostracism, helplessness, and silence. Hardly do we picture women as freedom fighters or war heroes. This is because narratives of war are generally phallogentric, and men are depicted as the heroic sons of their motherland who come to its rescue whenever it is in danger while women are portrayed as passive or victims only. However, Dilruba Z. Ara's *Blame* recounts a nontraditional narrative of the 1971 Liberation War of Bangladesh where two women are portrayed as freedom fighters as well as Biranganas who not only fight against the enemy of the country but also against their own society and dear ones. Hence, in contrast to the previous chapter that discusses the Biranganas' plight as pariahs and their resistance, this chapter aims to explore an unseen image of women in the context of the 1971 Liberation War and examine society's denial of their identities as heroes.

Dilruba Z. Ara divides her novel *Blame* into three parts where she scrupulously constructs the plot for the main event of the narrative which is the 1971 Liberation War of Bangladesh. The novel is crucial to understanding how the women of the then East Pakistan came out of their conservative family traditions and actively participated in the process of nation-building. The first part of *Blame* is set in the year 1965 where Ara introduces the audience to the socio-political setting of East Pakistan and the political turmoil that was going on between the two parts of Pakistan during that period. The novel starts with its protagonist Laila, the eldest daughter of the Kazi family (based in Chandgaon, Chittagong), and her childhood friend Shanto who belongs to a Hindu family. Laila receives a parrot from Shanto as a gift and is rebuked by her aunt Mili for it. Aunt Mili says, “Girls from the Kazi family do not accept gifts from boys who are not related to them. And especially from Hindu boys” (Ara 6). Shanto and his sister Gita are lower caste Hindus whose habitat is in the outskirts of the Kazi household. The thirteen-year-old Laila could not understand why she is not allowed to mingle with her childhood friends anymore. But Laila was aware of the Kazi family’s traditions that prohibit a Muslim woman from meeting any boy who is not a family member. Moreover, the women must abide by their guardians, especially the male members of the family. As Ara establishes the plot for the upcoming war in the initial chapters, she finishes the first part of her novel with the events of the 1965 Indo-Pak war that “exacerbate the existing strain between East and West Pakistan” (Ara 40).

The second part of the novel (1968-69) is mostly set in parts of Dhaka city where Laila comes to complete her higher education. Laila is different from the rest of the girls of her age. Unlike Mariam from *The Search* who always dreamt of becoming a wife and a mother, Laila “wanted a different life from that of a traditional housewife” (Ara 46), the typical life for every

Kazi girl. Hence, she rebels against her parents who never liked the idea of any girl pursuing higher education since “Books will not get her far in practical life” (Ara 166). Instead, it would take the naive girl out of her domestic territory. Yet, with the support of Alam Khan, Laila’s would-be father-in-law, she comes to Dhaka. Laila at first stays with Alam Khan’s family in their Kalabagan residence. The history professor Alam Khan, unlike Laila’s father and uncle, discusses history and politics with the females of the house, though Laila’s maternal aunt Salma Khan (Alam Khan’s wife) is as orthodox as Laila’s mother who believes politics is not for women. Despite her aunt’s strict forbiddance, Laila moves to the ladies’ hostel of Eden College. Here she gets exposed to the ideas of revolution and independence as she meets girls such as Camilla and Rashida who practice politics actively. Though these new ideas clash with her traditional teachings, Laila tries to think of them critically and does a lot of reading to grasp these concepts. Laila, along with Rashida, Camilla, Santo, Gita, Jamil (Laila’s fiancée), and Kamil (Jamil’s Brother), visits the house of the secular artist Amzad Khan, whose residence is the den of the revolutionary youngsters. With the help of Amzad Khan and Professor Merina Khan (the provost of Eden Hostel), the youngsters, united by their detestation against the unjust treatments of West Pakistan, form a revolutionary group, though this matter remains confidential. Laila finds her identity of a Kazi girl to be conflicting with the identity of a citizen of the country, but at last, she comes to the conclusion that her responsibilities towards the country hold greater importance than her obligations towards the Kazi family.

The third part titled “1970-71” is the prime section of the novel as it narrates the story of the war. As Laila’s grandmother dies, Laila, along with Alam Khan and Gita’s family, leave Dhaka for Chadgaon to attend the funeral. In the meantime, the historic 7th March Speech of Bangabandhu takes place where Sheikh Mujib indicated the possibility of an upcoming war.

Though Laila listens attentively to the males' conversation regarding the political issues, she refrains herself from participating as she is now in Chadgaon, within the domestic territory of Kazi family. As everybody remains stuck in Chittagong due to the ongoing political unrest in Dhaka, the war begins. As the war breaks out in Chittagong too, Gita's family, along with the Kazis and Khans, move to Potya except for Jamil, Kamil, Santo, and Jadu (Laila's elder brother) who join the Mukti Bahini in Chittagong. Kamil and Shanto visit Potya to recruit freedom fighters and ask Laila and Gita for their help. Aunt Mili volunteers to help. Together they make many Bangladeshi flags out of their sarees, kameezes, curtains, and whatever fabric they could find in green, red and yellow color. The villagers contributed to the war in their own ways too. Bhuiyan and Dipu mention that "Women helped the freedom fighters by providing them food and, at times, shelter" (220). The villagers help the Mukti Bahini to hide inside the College House. In the meantime, Gita, Laila, and Aunt Mili start preparing food for the freedom fighters. Numerous village women and children helped to cook and deliver the food every day. People from the neighboring villages helped too by sending provisions regularly. Generally, physical fights and armed resistance are pictured when speaking of war and the soldiers on the battlefield are glorified, but, during the Liberation War of Bangladesh, the freedom fighters would have found it impossible to continue their fight without the help of the civilians, especially the women, many of whom worked behind the scenes in their own small ways to ensure the success of the war. However, these contributions were hardly acknowledged since, according to the general understanding, "these were not heroic acts but were 'small gestures' owed to family and friends," so they "presented them as 'duty'" (Saikia 192). Laila's mother, Hasna Begum, too did not appreciate her daughter's involvement in the freedom struggle as she told Laila, "This might make you into an unmarriageable girl" (Ara 203). For traditional Bengali people, a girl's life

revolves around her marriage, husband, and children, so she must not do anything that might ruin her image. But Laila did not pay any heed to her family and continued with her efforts since the country mattered to her as much as her own life, and she wanted to be a part of the nation-building process as well.

It was an ordinary afternoon when the first air attack came on Potya, massacring both habitats and human lives. Laila then realized how fragile human lives are and how vicious a war could be. So, after moving to another village situated on the outskirts of Mohora, she decides to join the Mukti Bahini as a freedom fighter since she does not wish to have a meaningless death. Moreover, she wants to protect herself and her family. As Laila asks Jamil to help her meet the Sector Commander, Jamil refuses, saying, “War is not for women” (Ara 234). But Laila was prepared for a confrontation so she retorts, “If a woman can play the role of a victim of war, why not the role of a warrior?” (Ara 234). Laila was adamant to become a freedom fighter as she knew that “War and death don’t care about gender” (Ara 233). Laila again faces prejudiced comments upon meeting the sector commander, Major Hasib, who tries to weaken her determination, saying, “Your desire to serve your nation as a freedom fighter will always be regarded as an action against your family” (Ara 240). He also reminds her that one day the war will end and everything would go back to normal but she would never be able to “go back to being an ideal girl again” (Ara 241). The patriarchal society defines “the ideal woman as the one who does not strive to break the bonds of control” (Wadley 118). Hence, women who go against their family teachings and authority are considered unfit for the society and are often ostracized. But Major Hasib agrees to train Laila and Gita as he realizes that their love and loyalty towards the country is no less than a man’s. Laila knew no one at home would welcome her decision, and as soon as the words of her joining the Mukti Bahini got out, she was condemned by all, and her

freedom fighter brother, “Jadu hated that she had the guts to become independent of her family more than her becoming a freedom fighter” (Ara 245). Jadu could not accept the fact that Laila, in spite of being a girl, joined the liberation struggle which was considered to be a man’s job. Harrington mentions that men generally deny accepting any woman as their comrade on the battlefield as if they feel that “Her ready acceptance of dangerous missions seemingly emasculates her male comrades” (19). It was as if Jadu too felt emasculated in the presence of his freedom fighter sister. Moreover, Laila and Jadu, who were children of the same parents, were treated differently by the entire society for their similar actions due to their differences in gender. However, Butler suggests that “gender is socially constructed: hence, gender is neither the casual result of sex nor as seemingly fixed as sex” (8). The society tries to limit the experiences and rights of its women by imposing certain gender roles on them which are not facts but “fabrications and manufactured” (Butler 185). Hence, through socially constructed gender binaries, society presents men like Jadu as heroes in everybody’s eyes while women like Laila are seen as perpetrators only who show the audacity to defy their gender roles. But Laila was well aware of the discriminative nature of society so she remained strong against all condemnations.

Ara not only portrays the heroism of the female freedom fighters in *Blame*, but she also constructs the fear of shame that threatened women’s position in society at that time. She mentions in the novel, “Each girl in the field was usually provided with a cyanide capsule” (249). It implies that death was considered to be a better option than living the shameful life of a sexual victim. Laila and Gita too had a cyanide capsule hanging from their necks as they were not safe from the threat of rape, though they were armed. One day the Pakistani military came at dawn and Laila, without losing her composure, led the people of her camp to the bunker. But as Hasna

Begum realized her husband Harun Kazi and six-year-old daughter Faridah were missing, she pleaded with Laila to save them. As Laila went back in search of them, she found Harun Kazi being tortured at the hands of the army. Laila, like a true freedom fighter, fired her gun at the enemy. But she could not save her father since she was alone against several soldiers, and at last, she was captured and taken to the army camp. Laila tried to evade the fate of a Birangana by taking the cyanide capsule but she could not as one soldier snatched it from her. Her mother and brother wished for her death as “Laila’s returning alive would undermine the family’s status: it would stigmatise the honor of the Kazis” (Ara 273). Their behavior again makes it evident that society prefers death over a shameful life for its women. However, Laila came back alive thanks to Jamil. Jamil, who spoke fluent Urdu and worked as a spy for the Mukti Bahini, struck a deal with a Razakar and saved Laila by exchanging her with Gita. But, except Jamil, everyone in the Kazi family detested Laila for being a rape survivor. Moreover, Laila’s plight was more grievous as, according to Wakelin and Long, “Whether a woman rape victim accepts and adheres to the gender role ascribed by society affects the extent of blame she will receive for her ordeal” (477). Laila had first defied her family traditions and gender norms by becoming a freedom fighter, and now she had marred their reputation by becoming a victim of sexual violence. Hence, her family declined to accept her back saying it was her fault for desiring to be a Muktijoddha and then getting raped. As it has been described in the previous chapter, a Birangana could be reinstated into the patriarchal society only through marriage, and Yasmin as well as Mariam got married in hopes of social rehabilitation. The same incident happened with Laila. Hasna Begum and Jadu let Laila stay in their guest house only because Jamil promised to marry her. Laila was married off to Jamil against her consent on the same day she came back home from the army camp.

The crude sexual violence, ill-treatment of family members, the sudden marriage — all of these events together made Laila lose her composure, but soon she regained her mental equilibrium. She started exercising and eating more to gain her physical strength since she was determined to save Gita anyhow from the army camp. Laila was ready to go through all the tortures again and die if necessary to save her childhood friend and comrade, Gita. Laila's courage and willpower to save Gita testify to her heroism as "Heroism consists of actions undertaken to help others, despite the possibility that they may result in the helper's death or injury" (Becker and Eagly 163). However, instead of acknowledging her fortitude, people accused her of being mad, though this did not deter her. Laila saves Gita with the help of Jamil, Kamil, Santo, and a group of freedom fighters. To Jamil's utter surprise, Laila brutally kills a Pakistani soldier during the mission, first by thrashing his head with a cricket bat and then by slashing his throat with a knife. Jamil does not congratulate Laila on her bravery since she is a woman. A man may boast about his killings during the war and people would congratulate him for his gallant efforts, but a woman would be lamented for the same actions since it contradicts the traditional 'womanly' behaviour. Society implies that, women are supposed to be meek and gentle, and not violent. Laila is well aware of the unjust treatment of society, so she knows that, for acts like these, she would be viewed "as a dehumanised woman, a murderer, many other things - but not a war hero" (Ara 345), which was evident in Jamil's shocked expression too. Hence she keeps it a secret from everyone else.

However, unlike Laila, Gita's family showed her sympathy upon her return from the army camp. They also told her that they loved her in spite of her being a rape victim, but when Gita asks them to take her to Dhaka with them, they never returned. Though Gita's parents did not blame her for her shameful experience, they could not accept her as a member of their family

either since they knew they would never be able to get Gita married. Gita had not simply lost her virginity, she had lost it to a Muslim man which made her more disgraceful than the other rape victims in the eyes of her community. As Buhler in his translation of Manu's scripts mentions, "By the sacred tradition the woman is declared to be the soil, the man is declared to be the seed" (333), and it is important for the soil to be pure. Gita as a Hindu woman can never get married according to the Hindu laws since she as the soil is impure now and unworthy of being a mother or a respected wife. So her parents disown her because, without marriage, her rehabilitation in society would remain incomplete.

Laila feels greatly responsible for Gita's condition, but she does not let her spirit decay. Like a real hero, she gathers her own courage and helps Gita to gain her confidence and they go back to Dhaka together with Alam Khan's family. Though Laila appears strong from the outside, the degrading behavior of people puts her in a dilemma. As her mother-in-law Salma Khan comes to know that both Laila and Gita were rape victims, she refuses to accept Laila as her daughter-in-law and blames her for disgracing the families. Salma Khan even asks God's forgiveness "for being in a room with a raped woman" (Ara 351) as, to her, the Biranganas were polluted. As Berger and Luckmann suggest, "the individual becomes what he is addressed as by his significant others" (152). Laila too starts contemplating her identity as an impure woman and ponders "if God also considered her polluted" (Ara 309), and if she was really unworthy of being a respectable wife and mother. When Laila and Gita leave for the women's clinic in Dhaka Medical College, Salma Khan slams the door behind them, and no other family opens theirs to bid farewell. These shut doors symbolize the society's ostracization of its Biranganas by labeling them as fallen women. But, unlike Yasmin and Anuradha, Laila refuses to comply with the socially imposed identity. She retains her resistance and, with the help of Alam Khan, she

continues her fight against the prejudiced social system of independent Bangladesh. Both Laila and Gita struggle for a new identity other than that of the fallen woman. As Mariam and Tuki found solace in each other towards the end of their life, so also Laila and Gita become each other's support system and pass the difficult times together. They finally gain new identities along with financial empowerment and manage to live a decent life, away from their families. Kramer claims that "individuals' willingness to take psychological and social risks in pursuit of desired but challenging future identities" (263) make them heroes. Laila and Gita think of themselves as Muktiyoddhas and Biranganas, but they never consider themselves as whores, and they fight on their own for social rehabilitation as well as a new identity. Though their society does not accept them as war-heroes, their courage, resistance, and resilience do prove their heroism.

Bangladesh remembers the Biranganas as a generic figure of the 1971 Liberation War who are described in terms of their sexual violence, trauma, and helplessness. But not all of them can be defined through these pessimistic connotations. Biranganas like Laila and Gita who fought for their own country's liberation as freedom fighters, and later fought for a new life and identity can never be reduced to mere victims. Though society labeled these heroic figures as fallen ones due to their gender, Laila and Gita's actions prove that gender is only a social construction. Hence women can possess heroic qualities too, and Biranganas are really the brave ones who have also earned the title of war-hero.

Chapter Five

Conclusion

This thesis has explored Rizia Rahman's *Letters of Blood*, Shaheen Akhtar's *The Search*, and Dilruba Z. Ara's *Blame* in light of Berger and Luckmann's theory of "social constructionism" to depict how the Biranganas' identity has been orchestrated by society as victims. The society, being an active agent of patriarchy, compelled its rape survivors to accept the identity of fallen women by inflicting shame and guilt upon these women for their loss of virginity which is equated to their honor. Moreover, the fear of shame made the communities inhumane enough to kill and ostracize their daughters as well as wives. The study shows how countless Biranganas like Yasmin and Anuradha had to comply with the socially imposed identity of whore and had to choose brothels as their permanent address out of their repulsion towards the society that had miserably failed to rehabilitate them. The country became liberated but the price for liberation was paid by the thousands of rape survivors who were forced to seek refuge in the darkness of places like Golapipatti and Daulatdia.

An NBC news report made on the Biranganas describes the rape survivors as traumatized, ostracized women and it states that "politics, the war, and even the liberation are not really the concerns of these women. They are the innocent victims of war" ("Rape during the Liberation War in Bangladesh" 3:17-3:25). The news report represents the established discourse on Biranganas as passive victims, but, contrary to this narrative, this study shows that Biranganas played an active role in the Liberation War too. Laila and Gita from *Blame* vouch for those women who were active agents of the nation-building process and participated directly in the frontal war as well, but the society denied them the hero's identity. This paper has used Butler's

theory of “gender performativity” to demonstrate how the phallocentric society, through its constructed gender norms, has identified its female freedom-fighters as dehumanized women and reduced them to whores instead of giving them the recognition of war heroes only because their gender is female.

However, the paper has found a common pattern in the trail of incidents that all the Biranganas encountered after liberation. After being released from the rehabilitation centers, families tried to marry off these women immediately. If these rape survivors refused to marry, they were thrown out on the streets. Some families tried to kill their Birangana daughters to save their reputation. Women who chose to marry could not stay married for too long because their husbands and in-laws treated them as whores on a daily basis. The patriarchal society could not even ensure jobs for these women, let alone a safe environment. As a result, some Biranganas chose the life of an actual whore, while others continued their struggle to shed off the identity of Birangana. The three novels analyzed in this study highlights Yasmin, Mariam, Anuradha, Tuki, Laila, and Gita as Biranganas who have gone through identical circumstances but reached different ends because of the choices they made.

The Liberation War narratives have painted all the Biranganas with the same brush, depicting them as ashamed, silent, and suicidal. However, this paper has shown that not all Biranganas stayed quiet regarding their wartime experiences of sexual abuse. Yasmin and Anuradha never hid the fact that they are Biranganas, and were rather vocal about it as well as against the crude injustices they encountered after the war. Though they had enough reasons to commit suicide, they chose to continue with their lives with the identity of fallen women, and becoming prostitutes was their own way of avenging the insults that they received from the society which mocked them as Barangana. It shows that Biranganas are not docile victims, but

social rebels who did not give in. Rather, they showed the courage to challenge the unjust social prejudices.

Furthermore, the study has also traced characters like Mariam and Tuki from *The Search* and Laila and Gita depicted in *Blame* who resist the socially imposed identity of fallen women. While Tuki thoroughly refuses to see herself as a victim, Mariam, Laila, and Gita stay strong enough to fight their impulse of giving in. Though all of them are deserted by their families, they continue their journey in quest of a new identity and better life, and they succeed at last in protecting their subjective identities too. Hence, this paper concludes that Biranganas are truly heroic figures since they very much possess the courage needed to emerge from their socially constructed identity of fallen women, and it is their resistance, willpower, and bravery that testifies to their heroism.

However, it is disappointing to state that not much research has been found showing Biranganas as anything but victims. These women were an integral part of the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War history, but not much about them is known except the narratives of sexual violence and ill-treatments of the society that recounts their plight as passive victims on repeat. Therefore, more researchers should come forward to investigate this historic figure of war — the Birangana — from various perspectives so the next generations of Bangladeshis can remember these brave women through the tales of their heroism.

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