

The Horrific Accounts of Women's Torture: A Study of War 1971 and I

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Abstract

The Liberation War of 1971 is a significant historical event in Bangladesh. The length of the war was nine months, but it left the killing of three million people, the exodus of ten million refugees, and the rape of around four lac women. Women were the worst sufferers during the war. They were abducted, raped and tortured irrespective of their cast and creed. Neelima Ibrahim narrates the horrific accounts of women's torture in her book *Aami Birangana Balchi*. It is the first compilation of Birangana's memories. The book was translated into English in the name of *War 1971 and I* by Fayeza Hasanat, which is the primary text for this article. The article intends to explore how the horrific life of the victim women began through abduction and reached its climax through sexual, physical and psychological torture. It also focuses on why the Pakistani Army targeted women during the war. Primary text and secondary sources are used to write the article.

Keywords: Horrific Torture, Abduction, Rape, Birangana, War Heroine.

Introduction:

Bangladesh became an independent and sovereign country through the Liberation War. The war continued for nine months—from 26th March to 16th December 1971, but the spate of violence led to the killing of thirty lac people, the exodus of one crore refugees, and the rape of around two to four lac women. Women were the worst sufferers during the war. They were abducted, raped, physically and psychologically tortured irrespective of their cast and creed. The horrific torture is the cause of trauma that spills over into the memory of the nation as it still tries to heal from the wounds of war. After the independence, a few victim women were kept in the rehabilitation centre at Dhanmondi. Neelima Ibrahim interviewed some women in the rehabilitation centre and published *Aami Birangana Balchi* in 1996 and 1997. The book was translated into English and named *War 1971 and I* by Fayeza Hasanat in 2023 to attain global exposure. The book covered the interviews of seven victim women. The book, for the first time, is recorded as the earliest visible evidence of the great sacrifice of raped women, which brought their individual stories to the public sphere. It is divided into seven chapters. Each chapter contains a single women's story. The writer mentions that the purpose of her text is to give voice to the survivors and their communities to restore memory (Ibrahim VII). It is a memoir that is reported as the personal narrative form and collective narrative that turns the reader into the horror of sexual, physical, and psychological torture and violence. The book discloses the harrowing struggles of Tara Nielsen, Meher Jan, Rina, Shefali, Mayna, Fatema, and Mina. All are fictitious names in this text. They represented almost all the women who were sexually abused during the liberation war of Bangladesh. The article intends to explore how the seven women of *War 1971 and I* suffered different forms of horrific torture during the Liberation War of Bangladesh. It

wants to investigate their terrible stories of abduction, and sexual, physical, and psychological torture. It also focuses on why the Pakistani Army mainly targeted women during the war.

Background:

Like the Liberation War of Bangladesh, many wars have occurred in different places since the earliest war history. The reader gets different narratives from male and female writers in every war. Men's and women's narrative styles, content, and approaches are different. Men's stories are preoccupied with heroism on the battlefield, whereas the narrative of women is defined by issues (Portelli 27). In all wars, women are vulnerable because most of the soldiers are male. They desired women's bodies as their sexual objects and committed mass rape as the war tactic. For instance, Japanese soldiers have committed mass rape on an extensive scale between 1932 and 1945 in China, Korea, Malaysia, and Philippines. The German Army did the same thing in Belgium and France. The Serbians committed mass rape, sexual assault, and torture in Bosnia Herzegovina between 1992 to 1995 (Mamun 21).

The sufferings and misery of women have been brought to the literature. For instance, *The Light of Days: The Untold Story of Women Resistance Fighters in Hitler's Ghettos* by Judy Batalion is a detailed narrative of severe physical and sexual violence against women. *The Comfort Women: Sexual Violence and Postcolonial Memory in Korea and Japan* by Sarah Soh tells the stories of victim women from their girlhood to subjugation and focuses their efforts on overcoming the traumas of their past. *The Girls of Atomic City: The Untold Story of the Women Who Helped Win World War II* by Denise Kiernan recounts the stories of young women who worked at the vast Oak Ridge, Tennessee atomic installation during WWII. *The Rape of Nanking: The Forgotten Holocaust of World War II* by Iris Chang explores the mass murder and mass rape of Chinese civilians committed by the Imperial Japanese Army in Nanjing of China. During the Liberation War of Bangladesh, many women were abducted, sexually, Physically, and psychologically tortured by the Pakistani Army and their collaborators. Saikia narrates that during the 1971 war, Bangladeshi women were kidnapped and raped by Pakistani perpetrators and Bengali collaborators (279-281). Muntasir Mamun said the Pakistani army and their collaborators Rajakars, Al-Badar, Al-Shams and the Peace Committee members had used the tools of mass killing, murder and rape to suppress the Bengalis (21). Their terrible stories have been focused on the history and literature of Bangladesh. Neelima Ibrahim's book *War 1971 and I* was the beginning of the genre. After her book's publication, many renowned South Asian scholars started to work on the accounts of Biranganas. It is assessed that around two hundred to three hundred accounts have already been recorded (Mamoon 15). Among them, the most notable are *The Spectral Wound: Sexual Violence, Public Memories, and the Bangladesh War of 1971* by Nayanika Mookherjee, *Women, War and the Making of Bangladesh: Remembering 1971* by Yasmin Saikia, and *Dead Reckoning: Memories of the 1971 Bangladesh War* by Sarmila Bose.

Many notable Bangladeshi authors and scholars worked on the narratives of Biranganas, which are written in Bengali. For instance, Dr M.A. Hasan wrote *Juddha O Nari (War and Women)* based on interviews with 267 female victims across 85 Thanas in 42 districts in Bangladesh. *Ekattar O Juddho Paraborti Kathya Kahini (1971 and Post-war Oral History)* is a compilation of interviews of different categories of women, published by Aain O Saalish Kendra. *Muktijuddho O Nari (Liberation War and Women)* by Rokeya Kabir and Mujeeb Mehdi is a book that contains a brief description of women's torture. *Biranganader Katha (Accounts of Biranganas)* by Surama Zahid is a collection of narratives of fifty Biranganas.

The Condition of Victim Women Before the War:

Neelima Ibrahim, in her book War 1971 and I, narrates the horrific torture of seven women. They were from different social and economic backgrounds but had a peaceful and stable life before the war. The war of 1971 brought a massive disaster in their lives. Tara Nielsen was from a well-established family. She lived in Rajshahi before the war. Her father was a doctor (Ibrahim 8). Meherjan was from a lower-class family but had a stable life before the war. Her father was a tailor (Ibrahim 34). Rina was from an aristocratic family. Her father was a secretary for the East Pakistan government. She was a third-year student in political science at Rajshahi University. (Ibrahim 58). Shefali belonged to a middle-class, her father was a lawyer (Ibrahim 77). Mayna was from a middle-class family. She lived in Narayanganj. She was eighteen and had a happy life before the war (Ibrahim 96). Fatema was from a lower-class family. Her father was a farmer (Ibrahim 114). Mina was from a middle-class family. She was born in Malibagh, Dhaka. Her husband was an employee in a private company (Ibrahim 129).

The above narration shows that all these women were from different social backgrounds. They had a pleasant life before the liberation war. However, the war turned their lives terrible, and their sufferings began through the abduction.

The Abduction Stories of the Women:

Abduction is the act of taking someone away by force. During wars, women are frequently targeted for abduction. The opposition group or enemies viewed women as the tools of sexual objects and kidnapped them. In Roman Mythology, the reader gets the incident of the abduction of the Sabine Women, where Rome inhabitants committed a mass abduction of women from other cities. During the Bosnian War (1992-1995), Bosnian Muslim women were kidnapped and assaulted psychically by the Serb forces (Thomas & Ralph, 1994). During the partition of India, it is estimated that between seventy thousand to one lac women were abducted and raped (Butalia 598). During the liberation war of Bangladesh, a vast number of women were abducted by the Pakistani Army and their collaborators. The terrible abduction stories of the women came to be known from different sources. Among that large number, Neelima Ibrahim narrates the terrible abduction stories of seven women in her book. Their abduction stories were distinct from one to another. Pakistani Army directly abducted Rina, Meherjan and Mina. The Bihari collaborators abducted Fatema, and the Bengali collaborators abducted Tara Nielsen and Shefali. Mayna freed her father in exchange for herself.

Pakistan army abducted Rina by killing her parents. Rina described that one day in April, the Pakistani Army attacked their house and killed her parents. One of the army officers grasped her hands and said, "What a beauty!" "Come, beautiful, come join our team!" (Ibrahim 59). Then, they took her to an Army quarter somewhere (Ibrahim 59). Pakistani Army abducted Meherjan in the same way. Meherjan narrated that they kicked the door open, killed her mother mercilessly and abducted her (Ibrahim 34-35). The Pakistan Army abducted Mina from a doctor's chamber. Mina said that one day in July 1971, her daughter became very ill, and she ran to the nearest doctor's chamber at Indira Road, Dhaka. Some of the Pakistani soldiers followed her and forcefully pulled and dragged her to their truck (Ibrahim 130).

The Biharis of Khalispur abducted Fatema under the leadership of Nasir Ali (a collaborator of the Pakistani Army). Fatema narrated that Nasir Ali's gang caught her on the way and dragged her towards their housing estate (Ibrahim 117). The local Bengali collaborators abducted Tara Nielsen. Tara said that on 27th March 1971, when she was fleeing with her parents on the way, their local chairman's gang blocked their road. They forcefully kidnapped Tara and took her to the police station. When Tara saw the chairman in the

afternoon, she fell to his feet and cried to help her (Ibrahim 10). Instead of assisting the Chairman handed over her to the army officer. Shefali was abducted by a Bengali collaborator named Faruk. He was her neighbor and studied at the same College. Shefali said, “Faruk pulled me down from that rickshaw and dragged me inside to hand me over to the Chief Army Officer. I was his personal gift” (Ibrahim 79). The story of Mayna is very different. On 25th March, some of the Razakars attacked Mayna’s house. They gang-raped her left the wounded body in the rubble and took her father. When Mayna regained consciousness, she ran to the camp and freed her father in exchange for herself (Ibrahim 96-97).

From the above abduction stories, it is apparent that all the women were abducted irrespective of their cast and creed. Their abduction stories were very pathetic. Their stories represented almost all the abduction stories of the Liberation War of Bangladesh. Pakistan Army conducted the abduction as a tactic of the war to collect Bengali women to fulfil their sexual desires and oppress their enemies.

Accounts of Rape:

After the abduction, Pakistan Army took the women to their desired places and tortured them in different ways, and rape was the most extreme of them. Rape is counted as wartime sexual violence. Dorothy Thomas said, “Violence against women in conflict situations assumes many forms; rape is often only one of the ways in which women are targeted” (Thomas and Ralph 1994). During the war of 1971, a huge number of women were raped regardless of their caste and creed. There are different opinions regarding the number of raped women in Bangladesh’s liberation war. Bruce O. Riedel estimated the number is 400,000 (Riedel). Yasmin Saikia estimates the number is around 200,000 (Saikia 152–170). The Pakistani government assessed the number as hundreds (Rahman). Despite the debates, it is recognized all over the world that around 200,000 to 400,000 women were raped during the liberation war of Bangladesh.

Among that large number, Nilima Ibrahim portrayed very pathetic and heart-touching stories of Tara Nielsen, Meher Jan, Rina, Shefali, Mayna, Fatema, and Mina. They were brutally raped several times during the war. Analyzing their rape stories, it is evident that there were incidents of single rape and gang rape by the Pakistan Army, Bengali collaborators, and Bihari collaborators (Urdu-speaking People in East Pakistan). For instance: Tara and Mayna were gang raped by the Bengali collaborators. After the abduction, when a jeep took Tara, suddenly, she jumped out of the running jeep and lost her senses. When she recovered, she found herself lying in a hospital bed where she was raped first by a Bengali. Later six or seven others raped her consequently (Ibrahim 11). At the beginning of the war Mayna for the first time was raped by a group of Bengali men (Razakars). They left her unconscious body in the rubble and captivated her father (Ibrahim 96).

Fatema was in the private camp of the Bihari for about a week. In the Behari camp, she, for the first time, was gang raped by the Bihari militant. She narrated that Nasir Ali, his father, and their fellows raped her several times. After the rape, she would lie on the ground like a slaughtered animal (Ibrahim 117). She added that when she cried for the drinking water, they urinated in her mouth (Ibrahim 119).

Rina was gang raped by the Pakistani military in a camp house. There were another twenty women like her. She narrated that the soldiers would enter, pull a girl out from the flock, and jump over her right in front of the rest. They would make them watch the whole gang rape and let them wait for their turn (Ibrahim 63). Shefali described almost the same inhuman attitude of the Pakistani Army. She was kept in a room with thirty women and raped brutally in front of others (Ibrahim 81). Pakistani Army took Mina to an underground room. There were another thirty or forty girls. The monsters would come down, pick

up the chosen ones, and go upstairs. After the nightlong tortures, their wounded bodies were returned to that dark place again. (Ibrahim 131).

During the wartime, Rina and Shefali went through a single rape torture by the Pakistani officers. For instance: Rina was raped by a Pakistani Colonel first. She said, "The Colonel took me as his own-should I say concubine? I submitted to his desire because I realized that submitting to one man's lust was better than being raped by many" (Ibrahim 61). Later, Rina was raped by a Pakistani Brigadier, Mr Khan, who was Colonel's superior officer. Rina narrates that he (Mr. Khan) entered her room like one hungry animal and devoured every part of her body. He punched and pinched and bit and slapped and choked and hit her constantly and did not leave her alone until she passed out (Ibrahim 62).

Shefali's terrible life began in the Army quarter when Faruk (a Bengali collaborator) handed over her to an Army Officer. She says, "Then he (Army Officer) undressed me and forced himself inside me like a hungry beast" (Ibrahim 80) and that's how she lost her chastity for the first time and became unconscious. Then Shefali was raped by another Pakistani who was a self-proclaimed poet (Ibrahim 81).

Accounts of Physical Torture:

Apart from the sexual torture, the victim women had to endure different forms of physical torture. Neelima Ibrahim, Yasmin Saikia, Nayanika Mookherjee and Tahmima Anam narrate the physical abuse of women in their writings. Among them, Neelima Ibrahim, for the first time, discloses a vivid picture of the cruelty of physical torture in her writing. One of the victims, Fateema, was severely wounded due to the physical torture. She said, "First, he brutally raped me, and then he grabbed my head with his two hands and shoved his penis in my mouth...The wounded animal grabbed a piece of cloth and tied my hair with it. He then hung me with the ceiling fan and turned the switch on to its fullest speed" (Ibrahim 119-20). Tara was also physically abused. She said, "I was nothing but an object. I had no heart, no mind, or no soul. I just had a body: a body that they could fondle and molest and torture; ...They kicked me and spat on me, and they bit me like hungry animals" (Ibrahim 12).

Another victim, Shefali, also described cruel physical torture. She narrates that after the brutal rape when she came to her senses found herself lying alone in a room. She looked at the mirror and could not recognize herself; it was cut, bruised, and blotched with nail scratches and bite marks. When she tried brushing her teeth, her mouth was sore, and her teeth were hurting. In her narration, the reader gets the description of brutal physical torture. Then Shefali was raped by another Pakistani poet (Ibrahim 81). She also added that on a freezing night, the Pakistan Army dumped their mangled bodies on the back of a truck and covered them with a big plastic. After a night-long journey, when the truck finally stopped, the soldiers then ordered them to stand in line and enter an underground bunker. They took off their clothes this time, leaving them naked and shivering in the cold (Ibrahim 81).

From the above narration, it became clear that the Pakistan Army Physically tortured the Bengali women along with sexual abuse.

Accounts of Psychological Torture:

Along with sexual and physical torture, the abducted women went through different forms of psychological torture. Among them, the notable was that Pakistani soldiers did not allow them to wear appropriate clothes. Even they had no right to talk to each other. For instance, one of the victims, Tara, said, they were not allowed to wear sari or dupattas because, in some other camps, few girls committed suicide using saris. Therefore, they only were allowed to wear a petticoat and blouse (Ibrahim 13).

Another victim, Mayna, explained she had a men's lungi and sleeveless T-shirts (Ibrahim 98). Mayna also said the Pakistan Army transferred her with six other girls to another camp and dumped them in a big hall room, a place that resembled a broken school. A bunch of the girls were lying down on the ground, with their bodies covered in blankets. They did not look at each other or change their position. They just lay there like mutilated cadavers (Ibrahim 97). They had no right to talk. "Where is this place?" Mayna asked one of the girls. "Shhh. Don't talk. They will kill you if they hear you talking".

Due to the sexual, physical and psychological torture, the victim women were so frustrated that some of them wanted to kill or get killed or tried to run away. Regarding this condition, Mayna said, "The nightly gangrape routine was driving me crazy. Within a month, I realized I was losing it. I got ready to either kill or get killed" (Ibrahim 98).

Theorization:

This article investigates different types of understanding analyzing the wartime torture of women. One of the understandings is that rape happens due to the natural side effect of war. According to this thinking, biologically, people are male and female, which produces behavioural changes and is the cause of why men show masculine character and women feminine. As most of the soldiers are male, they hold an inevitable, heightened masculinity that exposes itself in their libido through strong sexual desires that must be satisfied. According to this account, there are two significant explanations for wartime sexual violence. One is the substitution argument. According to this argument, during the war, soldiers do not get the opportunity to access their regular life to fulfil their sexual needs, namely through consensual sex with wives, girlfriends, or prostitutes. They are thus driven to rape as a substitute outlet (Baaz and Stern 19). This explanation has been criticized because if rape happens in wartime only about sexual desire, then how can one explain the fact that it is often accompanied by extreme violence or why some groups of women are targeted over others (Wood 2009). The other is rape occurs during the war because of wartime conditions. War made the people violent and brutal, and the usual rules of civilian life became collapsed. In those situations, social values and norms could not control the male soldiers. They feel free to fulfil their natural inclination toward sexual aggression (Gottschall 2004). According to this account, both women and men are subordinated to natural forces: "Women appear as silent victims of the expression of men's biology, and men as subjected to the drives of their bodies" (Baaz and Stern 19). This method provides the subsequent hypothesis: The sexual violence that occurred by the Pakistani Army in East Bengal is a side effect of conflict.

This sociobiological understanding of rape, however, has been strongly criticized by academicians for being excessively deterministic and essentializing in its treatment of men, reducing them to little more than a collection of animalistic drives and desires. It is argued to be a dangerous worldview that naturalizes and depoliticizes rape in war and thus hinders any action to stop it (Baaz and Stern).

The realization of gender as biologically determined has now been discussed in academic circles. In the second half of the 20th century, feminists, philosophers and sociologists started to focus on the culturally and socially created nature of gender (Sjoberg and Via). In this school of thought, it is argued that gender identities are part of the social imaginary, fluid rather than fixed and stable categories. This reconceptualization of gender argued that the violent behaviour of men is neither natural nor inevitable instead it is culturally and socially constructed. Looking at conflict, feminist academics challenged leading state-centric and military tactics in security studies and international relations for their gender partiality and avoidance of female speeches and the effect of wars on women. When studying wartime-gendered

violence, feminist scholars emphasize on power relationships between men and women, social structures of masculinity and femininity, and how gender as a learned attribute is not only shaped by society but also constructions social connections and activities. These viewpoints reject deterministic accounts and instead offer more nuanced understandings of the prevalence of gendered violence in conflict. This approach led to the following hypothesis: The sexual violence committed by the Pakistan Army in East Bengal is the region for the gender violence.

To understand torture against women during war, rape as a weapon of war theory and protest masculinity theory are more applicable. Rape as a weapon of war thinking suggests that sexual violence during struggle is frequently a deliberate tactic that serves military purposes. This method led to the following hypothesis: The sexual violence that occurred in East Bengal by the Pakistan Army is not a side effect of conflict but instead a tactic assumed to achieve military purposes.

The protest masculinity thesis is created from the schools of sociology and gender studies. It studies the symbolic power of gender in determining men's beliefs and activities. It suggests a crisis of masculinity as the source of male aggression generally and violence towards women more specifically. Applying the idea of protest masculinity produced the following hypothesis: The Pakistani Army's activities are a violent articulation of protest masculinity as a response to marginalization and the impossibility of gaining hegemonic masculinity through other socially recognized means.

Analyzing the different approaches, this article wants to say that during the Liberation War of Bangladesh, women were tortured by the Pakistani Army not only for any single approach but for multiple approaches. All the above theories are more or less responsible for the women's torture during the Liberation War of Bangladesh.

Conclusion:

Analyzing the book War 1971 and I, it is apparent that Neelima Ibrahim has documented oral narratives into a literary masterpiece through her lively portrayal of the experience of the raped victims who can speak for themselves. Spivak said if the problem of representation can be side-lined through support and opportunity, the marginalized and the oppressed can speak for themselves (25)

Analyzing the accounts of Tara, Meherjan, Rina, Fateema, Shefali, Mina and Mayna, it is clear that they had undergone horrific torture irrespective of their cast, creed, religion, location, education, or social status during the Liberation War of Bangladesh. Though their number is seven, they are examples of all the war victims women in Bangladesh. The Pakistan Army and their local Bengali and Behari collaborators how brutally abducted the victim women by killing their parents or relatives is horrific. Later, how they gang-raped or single-raped the victim women is horrible. Apart from rape, they also tortured the victim women physically and psychologically. The barbarian Pakistani Army treated the women like slaves or animals. This inhuman cruelty affected the women and made their lives intolerable, which caused their lifelong suffering.

Women suffered during the war for so many reasons. Therefore, there are different understandings of why the Pakistan Army and their collaborators committed those horrific tortures during the Liberation War of Bangladesh. One of the understandings is that rape occurs due to the natural side effect of war; it has two explanations one is the substitution argument, and another is wartime conditions. The other understanding is that rape occurs as a weapon of war and protest masculinity.

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