



Research Paper

Nasiruddin Yousuff Bachchu's *Guerrilla* (2011): A Cinematic Representation of the Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971

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Abstract

The Liberation War of Bangladesh in 1971 was an atrocious event in the history of South Asia that began on March 25, 1971, when the West Pakistani soldiers attacked the common people of East Pakistan (now Bangladesh). The Pakistani military carried out this brutal genocide under the military command of Yahya Khan, which killed millions of Bengali civilians. Bangladeshi film director Nasiruddin Yousuff Bachchu's film *Guerrilla* (2011), an adaptation of Syed Shamsul Huq's Bengali novel *Nishiddho Lobon* (*Forbidden Salt*) (1990), is a powerful cinematic representation of the Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971. The film tries to capture the struggle of the Bangladeshi freedom fighters with a special focus on the sacrifices of a Bengali woman against the oppressive Pakistani Army. It focuses on the protagonist, Bilkis Banu, a guerrilla freedom fighter, and shows how she becomes a rebellious woman after suffering personal losses. The film highlights the role of Bengali women during the Liberation War, shedding light on their contributions and the violence they endured. This film is unique because, for the first time, it depicts the active role of a woman who participated in the Liberation War fearlessly and her emergence as a 'new woman' within the male-dominated narratives. It successfully creates the cinematic world of war-torn Bangladesh through an engaging plot, brilliant cinematography and the performance of all the actors. Therefore, this paper aims to analyse *Guerrilla* (2011) as a cinematic representation of the Liberation War of 1971 and examine how it serves as a medium for preserving the Bangladeshi national consciousness.

Keywords: Cinematic Representation, Bangladeshi filmmakers, Jaya Ahsan, Nationalism, The Bangladesh Liberation War, Women in War.

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I. Introduction:

The Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971 was a transformative event in Bangladesh's history, and after nine months of warfare, Bangladesh began its journey toward independence. The collective sacrifices of the *Mukti Bahini* (Bengali freedom fighters), some political figures, women and others, excluding local collaborators, ultimately led to the liberation of Bangladesh, thereby earning it the designation of people's war. In the post-1971 period, several Bangladeshi filmmakers revisited the events of the Liberation War to construct a collective memory of national loss and resilience. Abdul Jabbar Khan's *Mukh O Mukhosh* (*The Face and the Mask*) (1956) marks the first feature film produced in East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) and represents a foundational moment in the history of Bangladeshi cinema. Then Zahir Raihan's *Kancher Deyal* (*The Glass Wall*) (1963), Subhash Dutta's *Sutorang* (*Therefore*) (1964), Khan Aatur Rahman's *Nawab Sirajuddaula* (1967), and Amjad Hossain's *Jibon Theke Neya* (*Taken from Life*) (1970) were some of the best feature films which were made before 1971. Thereafter, Zahir Raihan's documentary film *Stop Genocide* (1971) comes out as an experimental project which powerfully captures the atrocities perpetrated by the Pakistani military and highlights the sacrifices of the common people of East Pakistan during the nine months of the Liberation War. Then came a genre of war films in independent Bangladesh after 1971 that sought to project the wartime struggle through cinematic lenses, presenting battle scenes and the Bengali *Mukti Bahini*'s victories as well-known narratives and depicting women

as war victims.

Most Bangladeshi war films set during the Liberation War—such as *Ora Egaro Jon* (*They were Eleven*) (1972), *Muktir Gaan* (*The Song of Freedom*) (1995), *Shyamol Chhaya* (*The Green Shade*) (2004), and *Amar Bondhu Rashed* (*My Friend Rashed*) (2011) sought to represent masculine valour and projected female characters as caregiving mothers, supportive wives and helpless persons affected by sexual violence. Elora Halim Chowdhury, in her book *Ethical Encounters: Transnational Feminism, Human Rights, and War Cinema in Bangladesh*, mentions, “Muktijuddho cinema emerged as a tool, the camera as a weapon, the filmmakers as witness, to narrate the suffering and sacrifice of the Bengali nation and its violent birth” (Chowdhury 27). However, Nasiruddin Yousuff's directorial venture *Guerrilla* (2011) deconstructs the traditional portrayal of Bengali women in Bangladeshi war films, and we witness the bravery of Syeda Bilkis Banu (played by Jaya Ahsan) and other women in the film as active participants in the Liberation War. While depicting the war-torn Bangladesh of 1971 through cinema poses significant challenges, the filmmaker succeeds admirably in capturing its complexities. Vladimir Nilsen, in his book *The Cinema as a Graphic Art*, writes, “Realism in cinematic representation is not necessarily a flat and impotent copying of nature, but an art-interpretation of it such as will enrich us with a new perception of the genuine meaning, associations and essence of that nature” (Nilsen 17). The film *Guerrilla* (2011) successfully recreates the war-ravaged Bangladesh of 1971 with striking realism, guided by the director's vision and cinematic technique. It is an adaptation of the Bengali writer Syed Shamsul Huq's novel *Nishiddho Lobon* (*Forbidden Salt*) (1990), and the director's first-hand experiences of the Liberation War as a *Muktijoddha* (freedom fighter) added extra layers to the film. It won several awards in Bangladesh and at the 17th Kolkata Film Festival and became an unparalleled cinema in the history of Bangladeshi war movies. Therefore, Bilkis Banu, the protagonist of the film, emerges as the ‘New Bengali Woman’ who subverts traditional notions of women as submissive, passive, and war victims through her inner strength and hands-on commitment during the Liberation War.

II. Discussion:

The film opens on the harrowing night of 25th March 1971, during ‘Operation Searchlight’, with the *Mukti Bahini*'s chant of *Joy Bangla* (Victory to Bengal) in the background. We see that Bilkis's husband, Hasan Ahmed (played by Ferdous Ahmed), a journalist, is preparing to leave her to submit his latest report to a newspaper agency. Although he promises to return, he fails to come home the next day, and it is presumed that he was killed in a brutal attack by the Pakistani armed forces, leaving Bilkis without any closure. Then, the film begins to project the battle scenes between the *Mukti Bahini* and Pakistani soldiers. The film portrays the people of East Pakistan as agitated and distressed amidst the violence of the war. Bilkis is consumed by fear for her husband, convinced that he will never return as she listens to the radio reports detailing the atrocities of the war. In the book *Rising from the Ashes: Women's Narratives of 1971*, Mofidul Hoque states, “In many cases the death of the male member in the family suddenly put a great burden on the female head” (Hoque 5). For this reason, Bilkis joined the newspaper agency ‘The Guerrilla’ and began working alongside other workers, in addition to her job at a bank. While dutifully caring for her aged mother-in-law, Bilkis is condemned by the latter for coming home late at night and is blamed for Hasan's presumed death. Even though she has a challenging life, she frequently reminisces about her husband and the delightful days of their conjugal life. Bilkis bravely continues her work for the *Mukti Bahini*, encounters the legendary songwriter Altaf Mahmud (played by Ahmed Rubel), and undertakes the risky task of transporting a spool of recorded songs to Kolkata. In this way, to liberate the nation, most Bengalis/Bangladeshis, except local collaborators, participated in the Liberation War as an imagined community. Benedict Anderson, in his book *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, points out, “It is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (Anderson 6). Therefore, the film's narrative shows how a Bengali wife, also a bank professional, appears as a non-traditional woman, takes part in the Liberation War, and becomes the epitome of a ‘New Bengali Woman,’ suppressing her underlying distress.

In the film, it is also depicted how the Pakistani army tortured and killed the soldiers of the Bengali *Mukti Bahini*. Major Sarfaraz (played by Shatabdi Wadud), as a brutal Pakistani officer, effectively establishes an atmosphere of terror throughout the film. In a pivotal scene, Bilkis enters a gathering of Pakistani officers, is depicted as indulging in a party, and surreptitiously plants a bomb that ultimately detonates among them. In a particular scene, we see that Major Sarfaraz killed a Bengali civilian and also forced a *Muktijoddha* to utter *Pakistan Zindabad* (Long live Pakistan). The Pakistani Major Sarfaraz is portrayed as a brutal officer who never hesitated to kill innocent Bengali civilians during the Liberation War. In the film, we also see other Pakistani soldiers who fired openly and killed several Bengali freedom fighters without any restraint. British-Bangladeshi novelist Tahmima Anam, in her novel *A Golden Age* (2007), describes the brutalities committed by the Pakistani soldiers, and she mentions, “They raped. They murdered. They lined up the men and shot them into ponds. They practiced old and new forms of torture. They were explorers, pioneers of cruelty, every day outdoing their

brutality, every day feeling closer to divinity because they were told they were saving Pakistan..." (Anam 149). The film's visual portrayal of the dead civilians of Bangladesh is profoundly haunting and emotionally evocative. Major Sarfaraz was killed by the *Muktijoddhas* in the movie. In the film's climax, Captain Shamsad attempts to rape Bilkis but is thwarted when she takes her own life while simultaneously killing both him and freedom fighter Siraj with a hand grenade. Throughout the film, the horrific violence and killings perpetrated by the Pakistani soldiers are vividly portrayed. Shatabdi Wadud's dual performance as both Major Sarfaraz and Captain Shamsad underscores the idea that brutality and cruelty were prevalent in the same ways among all the soldiers of the Pakistani military. The film also highlights the courage of the *Muktijoddhas*, who bravely attacked and killed Pakistani soldiers. The young and inexperienced Bengali freedom fighters left their families behind to join the Liberation War, fought valiantly, and ultimately sacrificed their lives for the nation. Bangladesh could not win its freedom from the Pakistani rulers without their participation and sacrifices.

Also, the film highlights the role of local collaborators, or *Razakars*, who worked for the Pakistani army. It depicts how they betrayed the nation and considered the *Mukti Bahini* as *dalaals* (collaborators) of India. The film portrays them as ruthless individuals responsible for the systematic killings and sexual violence against Bengali women. They were supporters of the Pakistani army and enemies of the Bengali freedom fighters. Muhammad Ekramul Haque in his article "Current International Legal Issues: Bangladesh", writes, "The crimes were committed by civilians from the Eastern wing of the then Pakistan, who formed Peace (Shanti) Committee and Razakar, Al Badr, Al Shams Bahini 'auxiliary forces', and led those in aiding and collaborating with the Pakistani occupation army..." (8). In a specific scene, a *Razakar* attempts to harass Bilkis, engaging in acts of eve-teasing. They came to the house of Bilkis's brother-in-law, Taslim Sardar, and pressured him to join the 'Shanti Committee'. One of them said, "*Amra Islam er jhanda kayem rakhte chai*" (we want to keep the flag of Islam alive), revealing their roles as informers for the Pakistani army. One day, two local *Razakars* visited Bilkis' house, assuring her mother-in-law they would locate her son and take precious ornaments from the older woman, thereby betraying her. On another day, when Bilkis was coming home in a rickshaw, those two *Razakars* tried to molest her on her way. Their brutal nature is revealed when they caught the Hindu Milkman Naren and abused him physically. They also raped and killed Binni, the servant girl of Bilkis's home. In collaboration with the Pakistani army, they vandalised her brother-in-law's residence. While travelling to Joleshwari, she witnessed a *Razakar* forcibly removing a woman from a moving train, alleging that she was Hindu. One of the key reasons the film portrays the atrocities committed by the *Razakars* and members of *Jamaat-e-Islami* is that the director was able to produce the movie during Sheikh Hasina's administration—a period marked by the official recognition of the *Razakars* as war criminals and the execution of some of them for their crimes against humanity.

In addition to Bilkis Banu, the film also features two other female guerrilla fighters: Mrs. Khan and Shahin. A range of different female characters are also there, including Bilkis' mother-in-law, Binni, wives of Altaf Mahmud and Taslim Sardar, and several women portrayed as rape victims. It depicts acts of sexual violence perpetrated by the Pakistani Captain Shamsad, who raped Jaitun, the wife of Taslim Sardar and the two *Razakars* who raped Binni. Sarmila Bose, in her article "Losing the Victims: Problems of Using Women as Weapons in Recounting the Bangladesh War", mentions, "More than 2,50,000 helpless women became victims of their animal-like torture (meaning 'rape')" (3865). The film highlights Bengali women's roles not only as participants in the resistance but also through the lens of their gendered responsibilities. Mrs. Khan is portrayed as a mother; Shahin conceals a spool of recording tape in her baby's stroller, blending caregiving with covert operations; and Bilkis is shown tending to her elderly mother-in-law, reflecting the dual burden of activism and domestic duty. These women participated in the Liberation War through diverse forms of resistance while simultaneously fulfilling their socially assigned gendered roles as wives, mothers, and daughters-in-law. The film also portrays the harrowing experiences of Bengali women who were captured, tortured, and raped by the Pakistani army in military camps, many of whom did not survive. In post-independence Bangladesh, these women were honoured by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman with the title *Birangona* (war heroines). Nayanika Mookherjee in her article "Historicising the Birangona: Interrogating the Politics of Commemorating the Wartime Rape of 1971 in the Context of the 50th Anniversary of Bangladesh", writes, "With the end of the liberation war, Bangladesh was faced with the staggering number of 3 million dead and 200,000 women (contested and official numbers) raped by members of the Pakistani Army and by the Razakars (local Bengali and non-Bengali collaborators), within a span of 9 months" (588). Thus, the film underscores a recurring historical reality: in times of war, women are disproportionately targeted, often becoming victims of sexual violence and killings at the hands of opposing forces, from which they are rarely spared. In her book *Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Rape*, Susan Brownmiller portrays rape victims and their conditions during wars. She writes, "...rape becomes an unfortunate but inevitable by-product of the necessary game called war. Women, by this reasoning, are simply regrettable victims. . ." (Brownmiller 32). Therefore, it can be said that by challenging conventional, one-dimensional representations of women in war narratives, the film portrayed female characters as both victims and active participants in the nationwide crises.

With the assistance of the *Razakars*, Pakistani soldiers perpetrated violence against many Hindus in Bangladesh. In the film, this is exemplified by the character of Naren, a Hindu milkman who was publicly abused by the *Razakars*. Shahid Kader Chowdhury, in his article "Age, Gender and Religion of the Victims of the Bangladesh Genocide: A Case Study", mentions, "Being a Hindu was like a punishable crime in 1971. The Hindu community was a special target in the genocide. Being a target a large number of Hindus took shelter in India as a refugee. Those who were not able to leave the country faced brutality" (261). Hindus in independent Bangladesh continued to face targeted violence, and as a result of it, most of them left the country. Deep Halder and Avishek Biswas in their book *Being Hindu in Bangladesh: An Untold Story*, highlight, "Thirty years from now, no Hindus will be left in Bangladesh should the current rate of exodus continue" (5). It is shown in the film how intellectual persons, such as teachers and professors, were tortured and killed by the ruthless Pakistani soldiers. One notable depiction is of Major Sarfaraz torturing a History professor, illustrating the targeted violence against intellectuals during the conflict. In his book *A History of Bangladesh*, Willem van Schendel describes, "The final days of the war also saw a last assault on leading Bengali intellectuals. Pro-Pakistan Al-Badr militia rounded up writers, professors, artists, doctors and other professionals in Dhaka, blindfolded them and butchered them" (Schendel 170).

After her mother-in-law's death, Bilkis realises that the conditions of war-ravaged Dhaka are becoming dangerous, so she starts her journey from Dhaka to Joleshwari, her father's house. Childhood memories of Bilkis are depicted in the film through flashbacks. It also underscores the contrast between her earlier days of innocence and the present trauma she is enduring. The soldiers of the *Mukti Bahini* destroyed the rail bridge near Joleshwari. As a result, the trains could not pass through Joleshwari, prompting her to disembark and begin her journey on foot towards her village. She unexpectedly encounters Siraj, a *Mukti Joddha*, who assists and guides her to Joleshwari. While going to her father's house, she reminisces about her childhood days. After arriving there, she understands that the *Razakars* have destroyed the house and nobody is there. In a flashback scene, we also see that Bilkis is recalling her past days with her brother Khokan, which evokes the emotional depth of their sibling bond. Determined to give her younger brother Khokon a proper burial after his brutal killing by the Pakistani army, Bilkis sets out to recover his body. However, during this attempt, she and Siraj are captured by the Pakistani soldiers.

The director portrays Bilkis Banu as a multifaceted character who embodies both traditional notions of femininity and the 'New Bengali Woman'. She subverts conventional gender roles to some extent through her active participation in the Liberation War and display of inner strength, and her leadership roles are comparable to those of her male comrades in the guerrilla movement. Fahmida Akhter in her article "The construction of the 'new Bengali woman' in Nasiruddin Yousuff's *Guerrilla* (2011)" says, "Although we do not see Bilkis fighting with arms on an actual battlefield, her active role as a freedom fighter is constituted by such activities as her installing explosives, passing secret messages and other supportive tools to co-fighters, and producing the underground bulletin, *Guerrilla*" (202). On the other hand, we also witness the construction of her character as an embodiment of patriarchal ideals of feminine virtue in the film. In a flashback sequence, we see her husband praising her beauty, and she is also performing her household duties as a daughter-in-law. Throughout the film, we witness that she is sometimes frightened and, through her beautiful look, frightens others or arouses the male gaze of the men around her. John Berger, in his book *Ways of Seeing*, mentions, "Men act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between men and women, but also the relation of women to themselves. The surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed female" (Berger 47). However, the director constructs her identity as a virtuous woman. In this way, the film reinforces traditional gender norms of Bangladeshi society through its depiction of Bilkis's sexuality as a chaste woman. In Bangladeshi nationalist discourse, female honour is closely tied to chastity, and the ideal woman remains sexually 'pure.' Unlike the rape victims or sexually assaulted women, Bilkis is depicted as a pure, upright, and idealised woman. This ideological depiction conveys notions of ideal womanhood while challenging traditional gender norms.

The construction of Bilkis Banu's character and her journey as a revolutionary woman during the Liberation War of 1971 is also shaped by cinematic melodrama, as in South Asian films, which highlight emotional resonance, ethical bifurcation, and personal renunciation. As the protagonist of the film, Bilkis goes through a dualistic struggle- firstly, as a female *Muktijoddha*, which is a political identity, and secondly, as a woman who went through personal losses in her life, substantiating her persona as a tragic figure. Her inner agonies, patience, sacrifices, active participation in the Liberation War, and heroic martyrdom at the end resonate with the melodramatic narrative structure. The embedded societal paradigms shape her identity as both a traditional woman and an uncommon character. Therefore, it is evident that Bilkis's heroism as a female *Muktijoddha* is acceptable within the narrative precisely because it is accompanied by suffering and sacrifice, making her an idealised but ultimately constrained version of female agency. Fahmida Akhter in her article "The construction of the 'new Bengali woman' in Nasiruddin Yousuff's *Guerrilla* (2011)" says, "A devoted wife to her

husband, a caring daughter-in-law, a trusted worker at the office and at the underground newspaper, a desperate combatant, a passionate and loving sister, an attractive woman in appearance with an artistic calibre of singing: all these qualities are fused in Bilkis. These qualities promote her image as a 'new woman'..." (206).

The film's effective visual effects, realistic screenplay, and performances by all the actors enhance its appeal to the audience. The nation-state of Bangladesh emerged as a result of millions of people's deaths and sacrifices. For this reason, most Bengalis become nostalgic while watching the sacrifices of the freedom fighters on screen, and this film appears successful as an example of 'Muktijuddho cinema'. Anam Zakaria, in her book *1971: A People's History from Bangladesh, Pakistan and India*, says, "According to several Bangladeshi estimates, 30 lakh people were killed and as many as 2,00,000–4,00,000 women were raped in 1971" (Zakaria 10). As a war narrative, the film powerfully captures both the brutalities inflicted by the Pakistani army and the profound sacrifices made by the common people in the pursuit of a new 'Golden Bengal'. Proper background music elevates various portrayals in the movie, and the audience feels emotionally connected with the characters. In one sequence, the use of a song by Kazi Nazrul Islam in the background creates an atmosphere of national fervour in the film. Ritwik Ghatak, in his book, *Cinema and I*, writes, "Music: this is a great implement factor for a film; at times it has the last word. Through music one lets the film speak on a parallel level, a different level" (Ghatak 39). At key moments in the film, the soulful background music added emotional depth and enhanced the overall impact on viewers.

III. Conclusion:

At the end of the film, Captain Shamsad captures Bilkis, believing she is a Hindu woman. As Captain Shamsad attempts to violate her, Bilkis becomes a symbol of fearsome resistance and feminine strength. In a final act of defiance, she detonates a hand grenade she finds nearby, sacrificing her life along with those of Captain Shamsad and Siraj. In doing so, she emerges not as a *Birangona* (a war heroine marked by victimhood) but as a *Bir*—a warrior in her own right. In this way, Bilkis emerges as the embodiment of the 'New Bengali Woman' within the war narratives of Bangladesh. Bangladesh, previously part of the undivided Bengal, endured profound hardship during the 1971 Liberation War and its aftermath. The divide-and-rule policy of the colonial British government and the actions of certain political leaders led to the partition of East Bengal from India in 1947. Subsequently, East Bengal, later East Pakistan, emerged as an independent Bangladesh after Pakistani rule in 1971. Yasmin Saikia, in her book *Women, War and the Making of Bangladesh*, mentions, "In East and West Pakistan, the two groups fought with each other to correct the history they inherited from the British and sought to create an identity for ensuring the future and, in consequence, transformed themselves into victims and perpetrators" (Saikia 10). Whether the dream of a 'Golden Bengal' after 1971 has been fulfilled or not is a debatable question if we consider the present complex socio-political scenario of Bangladesh.

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