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STAR REVIEWS

A Review of War heroines Speak: The Rape of Bangladeshi Women in 1971 War of Independence

Dr. Nilima Ibrahim. Translated by Dr. Nusrat Rabbee. ISBN-10 : 1098357574. February, 2021.



WAR HEROINES SPEAK

The Rape of Bangladeshi women in 1971 War of Independence

from *Ami Birangona Bolchi*
by Dr. Nilima Ibrahim

Translated by
Dr. Nusrat Rabbee



Zakia Afrin

It took Dr. Nilima Ibrahim 25 years to publish the narratives of rape victims of 1971 whom she interviewed almost immediately after the war. Another twenty-five years later, Dr. Nusrat Rabbee's translation, *War Heroines Speak: The*



rape of Bangladeshi women in 1971 War of Independence offers a mirror to a society riddled with violence against women and subjugation all around. The narratives have remained sincere to the Bangla version with a translated work of poignant and relevant language. Yet, it seems the stories have taken on many layers of meaning for the generation born after the liberation war. It's the 50th year of independence, but how liberated are we truly?

The English translation stays true to the original Bengali version. "In these quiet narratives, the young women and children clearly express: how they went from an idyllic childhood to the horrors of genocide; how they continued to live with painful memories and social exclusion after the war" writes Dr. Nusrat Rabbee in the back flap. An expert of statistics and machine learning, Dr. Rabbee took this task upon herself continuing the legacy of her family's intimate sacrifice during the liberation war.

We follow Mrs. T Nielsen on her journey to Denmark from Dhaka as she finds family oceans away from her own— Meherjan, who preferred to live with the enemy in Pakistan rather than her natural home; Rina, who was brought back from the verge of leaving Bangladesh and later found a loving family. Shefali's strong rebuke of Bengali men who failed to save the women -"I have faced you and I have seen you from head to toe. I even had the misfortune to see your soul inside your body" - continues with the woes of Maina, whose trials and tribulations went on long into her married life. We witness Mina finding her old life after initial challenges. And then there is Fatema, the most tortured and affected one suffering a mental breakdown and coming back from hell to life. These stories are filled with deep melancholy that transcends the physical torture these women endured. After the war, a population ever so obsessed with detailed descriptions of rape incidents (how many were there? How long did they keep her? What was she wearing when she was found!) focused on that part of the history where *Birangonas* were rescued, given the honorary titles and put in Government care for rehabilitation. For generations, we have been memorizing the 3 million martyrs and 200,000 Birangonas who sacrificed themselves during the independence war. We have not so much discussed the treatment they received from their families, neighbours, friends and the community in general.

As Nusrat Rabbee correctly points out in the preface, rape as a weapon of war has not received its due attention and urgency of international community. The first charges of rape/sexual violence came in the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) in the early 90s. Prior to that, a definition of Rape was non-existent in International Law. The Bangladeshi ordeal just may be one of the worst cases of sexual violence documented in history. Dr. Rabbee applauds the domestic War Crimes Tribunal and justly demands accountability from Pakistan, a country



who has not only refused to acknowledge the genocide but also rallied the international community to condemn the effort as religious oppression.

One could read the book to learn or revisit history, to get a glimpse of daily lives around Bangladesh during the conflict, and even to understand how religious conservatives have played a horrifying role in the violence inflicted on women. Then there is the opportunity to explore the much avoided discussion of parallel of the treatment of rape victims in today's Bangladesh. The victim blaming continues in the form of pointing to clothing items, roaming after hours, being with male friends and a list of activities trying to blame the woman. Victims are forced to marry the rapist and many times carry a child conceived through rape. Women are constantly advised on how to dress, how to carry themselves in educational and professional spaces. Recently, for the first time, the Bangladesh High court ordered a rapist to marry his victim, a minor girl. The timing is particularly haunting- the 50th anniversary of independence, of the history of genocide, crimes against humanity, rape camps, and of the birth of the *Birangonas*. While a daughter of the Martyr intellectual Dr. Fazle Rabbee offers the new generation the legacy of heroism and resilience, the mirror she holds casts a shadow over our determination to build a socially just Bangladesh. It shows us how Government action without social acceptance can never last and patriarchy must end in all shape and form to offer women agency of their own lives.

It is a must-read for international readers interested in understanding Bangladesh and a guidebook for Bangladeshi youth to build a country envisioned during the liberation war. It is high time to revisit the aftermath of the war and our lessons unlearned. This translated work from Dr. Nusrat Rabbee is just the right place to start.

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