

1971: Fiction and History

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Abstract: Freedom is coveted, only when it is fought for. It is this specific reason which makes Bangladeshi Liberation war glorious for people of Bangladesh. It needs to be stated that, Bangladesh's road to independence was traumatic but priceless. Even though, everyone wants to be free and Bangladesh was united in its struggle for independence, yet in fiction and history reaction towards independence has differed. This article aims to show the different reactions or perspective towards Liberation war of Bangladesh through the two primary texts; *1971 and After*, which is a small anthology of short stories written about or the aftermath of Liberation war and *Ekattorer Chithi*, (Letters of 1971) a factual account of Liberation war, which is a collection of letters written by freedom fighters and their families. The short stories of *1971 and After* and letters from *Ekattorer Chithi* show different perspectives or point of views towards Liberation war; depending on the author's and writer's sensibilities and sympathies. This article's aim is to create a bridge between fiction and history and show how Bangladesh's Liberation war got documented in them.

Keywords: Fiction, History, Liberation, Perspective.

I

Any fictional account of war is always two fold; one from the perspective of the oppressors and another from the perspective of the oppressed. Therefore, for Bangladeshi people the war of 1971 was a fight for independence, for the then West Pakistani rulers it was a 'civil war' or a 'mutiny' that needed to be pacified. The stories of this article though are fictional tales of this 'brutish' pacification yet, they are accounted for in the historical document *Ekattorer Chithi*,¹ (Letters of 1971) which gives the stories credibility. In some stories victory is celebrated while in others mourning for loss of lives and dignity becomes prominent. But the most important purpose these short stories serve is; they document the history of Bangladeshi Liberation war in a fictional yet genuine way. On the other hand, *Ekattorer Chithi*, is a factual account that tells the tale of Bangladesh's road to freedom. It is also a testimony of or back up for this article's fictional narratives.

II

This article follows the basic critical concepts of the Chicago School of New Criticism in the examination of the social order and the realism of the subjective experience in and through narrative. The aim of this method is total objectivity and emphasis on having strong evidence for critical appreciation. As mentioned before, the stories of *1971 and After*, narrate the events of liberation war from different points of view. The first story that this article explicates is *Nineteen Seventy – One*, by Humayun

Ahmed, one of the most popular writers of Bangladeshi literature. The story begins “in medias res” and is narrated by a third person narrator. As sometimes “a third - person narrator is limited or unreliable the effect is very heavily foregrounded” (Short, 1996, p. 259). In this story the effect of personal insult and personal victory is foregrounded, because the third person narrator is narrating from a very objective point of view. The narrator tells us that the Pakistani “major was impossibly handsome” (Ahmed, 2001, p. 2) but this “handsome man” turns a simple school teacher Aziz master into a ‘muktijoddha’ or freedom fighter. However, Aziz is not a fighter with a gun; he is fighting with his spirit. Even though his mother scolds him for his cowardice, at the end of the story Aziz spats on the Pakistani major's body. The major asked Aziz to take off his clothing and state that he loves Pakistan. This triggers the urge to be free in Aziz and releases the ‘muktijoddha’ within him and the story ends with the army leaving and Aziz standing “a naked man, his head held high” (Ahmed, 2001, p. 7). This ending encapsulates emotions of the common Bangladeshi mass during the Liberation war, because they too turned in to freedom fighters in one way or other and their shabby homes became fortresses against one of the most powerful army of that era. We can find the same account of humiliation in two of the letters of *Ekattorer Chithi*. In the first letter a freedom fighter Mostofa Anwar Kamal writes on 1st November, 1971 to his mother that, he is in jail the army is inflicting appalling torture on them (Ahmod et al, 2009, p. 92). The second letter is written on the back of a cigarette packet by freedom fighter Jalal Uddin Shardar, he too is in jail and has nothing but a “lungi” (a traditional attire for Bangladeshi men). He pleads to the receiver of the letter Murad, to inform his brother about his current condition and also urges Murad to take some action to get him out of jail, if possible. The length of torture and humiliation that Jalal had gone through and his desperation for freedom becomes clear from the language of the letter. (Ahmod et al, 2009, p.118)

The Shadow of Vultures by Selina Hossain is also narrated from a third person point of view and achieves the same effect of foregrounding that the previous story did. However, unlike the preceding story this story presents a larger picture of liberation war. The story incorporates all the aspects of Bangladesh's Liberation war; Pakistani military and its oppression, freedom fighters and their families, “rajakakars” (betrayers), genocide and mass rape of women. The story tells us the tale of a freedom fighter who leaves his wife and small child at home only with a word of caution to join the Liberation war. His neighbor Rahmat Ali is his polar opposite a “rajakar”, Rahmat, whose name translates into merciful, is anything but merciful. He is ecstatic when “vultures were large in number” (Hossain, 2001, p. 53). Though, the narrator gives this information in a very unseeingly manner, it has deeper connotations. “Vultures” here are symbolic of the ominous future of the freedom fighter and his wife and many others like them. Rahmat Ali informs the Pakistani military about the whereabouts of freedom fighters, he also informs the Pakistani

officers that his neighbor too is a freedom fighter and his wife Rokeya is very beautiful. Towards the end of the story the freedom fighter is murdered and his wife, Rokeya, is repeatedly raped and murdered as well. But at the end of the story Rahmat is “shivering” (Hossain, 2001, P. 61) as he sees “Hundreds of vultures were perched all along the parapet” (Hossain, 2009, p. 61) which indicates a successful bombing by the “mukti bahini” (Freedom fighters), a victory after great loss. Similar situations are evoked in many of the letters of *Ekattorer Chithi*. Abdul Aziz writes to his wife Fazila on 16th April, 1971 that, “daily the Pakistani army is taking cow, goats, chicken and ducks and also young girls” (Ahmod et al, 2009, p. 16). The dreadful implication is that girls are also ‘food’ for consumption, the only difference between girls and chicken is, girls satisfied the sexual hunger of Pakistani army. Rumi, writes from Agartala, on 16th June, 1971 to his uncle Pasha, “I don't know what to write...there is so much to write about. But every tale of atrocity you hear, every picture of terrible destruction that you see is true. They have torn into us with a savagery unparalleled in human history” (Ahmod et al, 2009, p. 25). Indeed, Rumi's comment about unparalleled savagery comes to focus in the story *Victory Day*, by Kazi Fazlur Rahman. This story shows that with genocide and rape, racism too, is part of Bangladesh's Liberation war. It seems that West Pakistan's motto was not only to pacify the ‘mutiny’ of Bangladeshis but they were on a ‘crusade’ against Hindus. *Victory Day* tells us the story of Gauri, who was waiting for Bangladesh's victory not because she wanted to celebrate it herself but because she wanted to rest, eternally. Gauri, paid intimately and immensely for the independence of Bangladesh. She saw Pakistani army kill her husband and her children in front of her eyes. She and her son Amal were left alive because Junnun Khan, the security guard had his eyes on Gauri, he “desired you (gauri) since I (junnun) first saw you”. (Rahman, 2001, p. 103) But he wants to do the ‘right’ thing, which is convert Gauri into a Muslim and “solemnize our (Junnun and Gauri's) marriage” (Rahman, 2001, p. 103). In spite of such humiliation Gauri, waits till the day of victory to commit suicide because she believes that her son Amal “will be safe and able to grow up as a free man in a free Bangladesh” (Rahman, 2001, p. 98). It is only possible for her to concede to death in a free Bangladesh and get back the “honor and dignity the Pakistani animals took away” (Rahman, 2001, p. 98) from her in life. Though fictional tales, this is the length of courage, devotion and torture Bangladeshis went through to their road to freedom.

The Last Encounter, by Kazi Fazlur Rahman is the most important piece of fiction for this paper, if we take war and its aftermath into account. This story too is narrated in third person. The story tells us the story of a freedom fighter (Rashed) and a Pakistani captain (Azam). The story is set on the eve of Bangladesh's victory over Pakistan, when it was a matter of Pakistan's surrender only. The freedom fighter and the Pakistani captain are ‘trapped’ in the “contact zone”². The captain and the freedom fighter have many things in common, both were students of English literature, both have left their comfortable lifestyles to join the war. The Pakistani

captain is not a stereotypical 'villain' here; he realizes that victory of Bangladesh is just a matter of time and there is no point in killing the freedom fighter now. Unlike, other Pakistani characters in other stories, he does not suffer from blood lust. Later on in the story we also come to know that he does not have the physical lust either, on the contrary, he seems to be ashamed of his fellow soldier's actions. The story probes deep in to the psychology of people involved in that war or war of any kind. It tells us about Pakistan's "senseless yet systematic brutality" (Rahman, 2001, p. 94) that made peace loving Bangladeshis take up arms. This echoes the preface of *Ekattorer Chithi*, where it is stated that, it was beyond imagination that a nation recognized as "cowards" would rise up against the Pakistanis. (Ahmod et al, 2009, p. 5). The story also suggests that the captain too is tired of this senseless war as he refers to Wilfred Owen's poem *Strange Meeting*, especially the line "Let us sleep now...?" (Rahman, 2001, p. 97). Moreover, he puts forward a question to Rashed "But will you and I be able to sleep?" (Rahman, 2001, p. 97). Rashed and Azam also make judicious predictions about war, war criminals and their trail. Though those were fictional predictions, both Pakistan and Bangladesh have witnessed and are witnessing the predictions coming true.

Virangana by Helena Khan, is a tribute and testimony to thousands and thousands of rape victims who sacrificed their dignity for a free and liberal Bangladesh. However, the story is more than a tribute and testimony; it is a commentary on the title "virangana" (a female warrior and a fearless hero) and patriarchal society. This is a story of a girl (Rehana) who was taken to the Pakistani military camp and raped. After Liberation war was over Bangladesh bestowed the title virangana to those women who paid the price for Pakistani militaries lust and were huge contributors to Bangladesh's Independence, like the protagonist of this story. Rehana, tells us, "a virangana! What a glorious title! How high she has been raised by this honor! But in what golden box would she hide this diamond-like title?" (Khan, 2001, p. 119). Rehana's sarcasm is quite clear from the three exclamation marks and the word "hide", as in a patriarchal society virangana is actually a label not a respectable title. Even after the traumatic experience of being raped she is a true warrior who wanted to start a new life. Rehana wanted to renew her life with Shamsher, "a young professor" (Khan, 2001, p. 118). Rehana felt "There was a deep plea in the eyes of Shamsher" (Khan, 2001, p. 118), the plea transforms in to a proposal of marriage. Yet, Rehana can not accept the "plea" as Shamsher broke up his previous engagement with Lina, as she was a virangana too. As the story is narrated in third person and as third person narrators are not entirely reliable this story makes us bound to ask a question, why should such a glorious title become burden? This story's focus is not on 'heinous' crimes of Pakistani army, "rajakars", freedom fighters or even on Liberation war itself, the focus is on an 'animal' named patriarchy and its conception of a 'perfect' woman. Rehana and thousands and thousands of others like her are 'fallen women' for no fault of their own. Independence for which Rehana lost her most precious prestige has confined her to a

label which denotes respect but connotes 'fallen' or even 'untouchable'.

The White Lily, by Najmul Alam also focuses on the inner demons of Bangladeshi society more than the atrocities of Pakistani army. *The White Lily* is the story of Sajeda, a young, 'typical' rural Bangladeshi housewife. The story unfolds to showcase how Sajeda becomes a fighter from a 'typical' housewife. Sajeda too like Rehena in the previous story was raped by the Pakistani military; she too became 'fallen' woman in the eyes of the society, her mother in law and her beloved husband, whose child she was carrying. As she was raped, it was assumed that, she was carrying a bastard child, not the child of her husband, Sabdar. Sajeda too is a freedom fighter in the truest sense, as she fought for nine months to give birth to a son and "Everyone saw that Sajeda's newborn son looked exactly like Sabdar" (Alam, 2001, p. 90). These stories sharply contradict many letters of *Ekattorer Chithi*, still, they are a true tale of the perspective of Bangladeshi patriarchal society. The letters of *Ekattorer Chithi*, are sympathetic or even empathetic towards rape victims. For example, freedom fighter A.B.M. Mahabubur Rahman on 5th April, 1971 writes to his mother that, he once got caught by "rajakars" but the "rajakars" only took money and four or five young hindu girls and he wanted to save them with his life. Moreover, he states that he did not do so only because he was concerned about millions of other mothers and sisters who would need to be rescued (Ahmod et al, 2009, p. 14). It seems that mothers, sisters and wives only remain 'respectable' till they are virgins or physically 'pure'. *Virangana and The White Lily* are different from other stories of this article not only because they contradict *Ekattorer Chithi*, but also because they do not focus on outsiders but bring forward the inner demons of our patriarchal society. Whereas, all the short stories used for this paper are narrated from a third person point of view, the letters of *Ekattorer Chithi*, are obviously written from first person point of view. First person point of view of the letters creates a dual effect; firstly, the writers are no longer objective but very subjective and involved. Secondly, whereas, the short stories provide scope for the readers to respond to them based on their sensibilities, sympathies or even nationality, on the other hand, the letters are vivid description of Liberation war's different aspects and as documents of history there is little scope for multiple responses from the readers. Having said that, it also needs to be stated that readers do respond intimately to the letters as sometimes they are elaborate, with specific names of people who were associated with the war both Bangladeshi and Pakistani alike, sometimes they also give numbers of casualties in a fight, for example, Martyr Kazi Nurunnabi writes on 29th March, 1971 to his mother with regret that, though 250 police died only 4 (Pakistani) army died in a fight (Ahmod et al, 2009, p. 13). In another letter, Colonel Khondokar Nazmul Huda writes on 29th July 1971, to his wife that, He was happy to hear on the radio (daily) *Telegraph*, the news that his area was a free zone now. The report was covered by Peter Bill. He (Huda) also adds that he heard that it was the first time that Peter Bill gave any favorable report about them (Ahmod et al, 2009, p. 48).

Ekattorer Chithi, starts with the editors comment that, a year so glorious, so traumatic had never come in the lives of Bangladeshis before, the year was 1971 (Ahmod, et al, 2009, p. 5). This year is so glorious because it witnessed simple, peace loving Bangladeshis become warriors, fighters, fighting for their motherland or mothers because most of the letters are addressed to mothers and sometimes the line between mother and motherland becomes vague or overlaps. Bangladesh snatched victory or freedom from Pakistan as the then Pakistani army was one of the most powerful and advanced army in the world. On the other hand, Bangladeshis had no or little weapons and ammunitions; the war was won by sheer courage and valiant nature of Bangladeshi freedom fighters. It was a war of the mass, everyone from young to old; from literate to illiterate, rich to poor took part in it, either physically or mentally. Weapons surrendered to courage and love for the mother like nation. *Ekttorer Chithi*, documents all these aspects in the letters that it features.

IV

To summarize, it can be said that, this article is an attempt to collaborate fiction with facts. It also aims at showing different points of views towards Bangladeshi Liberation war, through the short stories (fiction) and letters (facts). The perspective from which the stories are narrated is essentially Bangladeshi. However, this article also gives scope to view non Bangladeshi characters who are also victims the 'heinous', 'unjust' war. Finally, this article is an attempt to showcase the different aspects of Bangladesh's glorious Liberation war to the world, through fiction and facts.

Endnotes :

1. As most of the letters in *Ekattorer Chithi*, are written in Bangla, some lines of the letters have been translated in to English to be used in this paper.
2. The term "contact zone" is coined by Mary Louise Pratt.

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