Elora Halim Chowdhury
Ethical Encounters: Transnational Feminism, Human Rights, and War Cinema in Bangladesh

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On the face of it, experiences of women feature more prominently in nationalist narratives of Bangladesh than in the parallel narratives of its neighboring nations. While contributions of women to the freedom struggles in India, Pakistan, or even Sri Lanka are, at best, acknowledged in footnotes, the story of Bangladeshi liberation celebrates stories of resistances by women, especially those suffering from sexual violence at the hands of Pakistani soldiers. Yet, as Elora Halim Chowdhury points out, the adulation is largely restricted to what men have found praiseworthy: the only legitimate nationalist narrative for women is one of suffering and self-sacrifice for the war. Any feminist politics that departs from this narrative faces immediate dismissal, as in the case of *Meherjaan*, a film depicting a Bengali woman's romantic involvement with a Pakistani

soldier, that had to be pulled off theaters in Bangladesh after widespread protests in January 2011.

Ethical Encounters squarely takes up this question of women's voice and representation with respect to nationalist narratives in Bangladesh. By studying a corpus of films that explore multiple and competing politics surrounding women and the liberation war, Chowdhury aims to create what she calls "an alternative and disruptive archive of feminist knowledge," where women's experiences of the war act as resources to challenge and criticize nationalist glorification of *muktijuddha*, the liberation war. Drawing upon Black feminist theory and the broader perspective of human rights cinema, the book attempts to create a new approach to gender and war cinema in Bangladesh beyond the binaries of oppression/resistance and victimhood/agency.

Chapters 1–3 focus on one film each: Rubaiyat Hossain's *Meherjaan* (chapter 1), Nasiruddin Yousuff's *Guerilla* (chapter 2), and Shameem Akhtar's *Itihaash Konna* (chapter 3). *Meherjaan* is the most controversial of them all, and the author closely analyzes the narrative of the film as well as the controversy after its release, exploring social and personal anxieties about trauma, sexuality, and national unity. In many ways *Guerilla*, a critical and commercial success in Bangladesh, stands in stark contrast to *Meherjaan*; it narrates the story of a woman soldier who gives her life for the struggle. For Chowdhury, *Guerilla* (the only film closely analyzed in the book that is directed by a man) represents the patriarchal and nationalist image of seeing women in the liberation war solely through the lens of victimization, death, and erasure. She contrasts *Guerilla* not just with *Meherjaan* but also with the more complex ethics of female friendship in *Itihaash Konna*, the story of a Pakistani researcher documenting the war crimes of 1971 and meeting her childhood friend in Bangladesh. Drawing on Leela Gandhi's concept of "dissident friendships," she argues that friendship between women can allow "for the possibility of intimacy and affliction across borders and boundaries" (102)—something that is simply not possible within the patriarchal and nationalist rubric of Muktijuddho.

Two competing strands of cinematic representation of women and Muktijuddho, in other words, are identified by the author for feature films: a patriarchal-nationalist one celebrating women's victimhood in service of the nation (*Guerilla*) and a feminist one foregrounding women's narratives to narrate alternate histories (*Meherjaan* and *Itihaash Konna*). The final chapters (4 and 5) extend this distinction to the realm of documentary and nonfiction films, such as Leesa Gazi's *Rising Silence*, Farzana Boby's *Bish Kanta*, and Shabnam Ferdousi's *Jonmo Shathi*. Inspired by interventions of Black studies scholars, Chowdhury studies these documentaries as archives of unacknowledged forms of oppression and domination that challenge and disrupt the nationalist narrative of liberation.

Simply by virtue of bringing to light an oft-ignored corpus of visual sources, the book is an important contribution to cinema and gender studies in relation to the historiography of modern South Asia. Studies of Bengali cinema tend to remain confined to internationally acclaimed directors, mostly male, from Kolkata. Productions from Bangladesh are typically ignored or dismissed, with perhaps the sole exception of the works of Tareque Masud and Catherine Masud. Chowdhury, in contrast, has focused on works from a cinematic tradition that, while significant in Bangladesh, has hitherto received little attention abroad. For this original research alone the book deserves praise, and Chowdhury has done a marvelous job in teasing out the narrative complexity and historical specificity of each film, yet putting several films in dialogue with each

other. While developing on the works of Yasmin Saikia and Nayanika Mookherjee, she has framed her argument not just in the form of a critique of national narrative but in dialogue with broader theoretical frameworks on transnational feminism and human rights cinema, especially in dialogue with recent Black feminist theory. It is a bold and commendable comparative move that will create interest in the book beyond the specific field of South Asian studies.

The argument could have been strengthened by closer attention to the networks of global capital and the political economy of activism that constitutes the material context of the films under consideration. This lacuna is especially clear in the analysis of *Meherjaan*, where the author tends to defend the director (Rubaiyat Hossain) from purportedly nationalist critics within Bangladesh yet stops short of a critical investigation of the social location and the "transnational" positionality of the director. But to what extent did networks of capital and patronage influence the politics of an alternate cinema, given that Bangladesh is still heavily dependent on humanitarian aid and NGOs? Was the target audience—or intended consumers—of *Meherjaan* and *Rising Silence* the same as that of, say, *Guerilla*? "International" human rights cinema, like all cultural commodities, has its own market and its own consumers. The author occasionally observes this aspect in passing, as when she notes that *Bish Kanta* was recorded with a Handycam Camcorder in Bangladesh while *Rising Silence* was produced in HD format by a London-based crew (120). But the political-economic and social implications of such divergences are never quite drawn out. Exploring this material aspect of the productions could have pushed the analysis beyond a somewhat stark opposition between nationalist history and transnational feminism.

References

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