



INVISIBLE DIARY IN SHAHEEN AKHTAR'S "THE SEARCH"

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Abstract:

The novel, *The Search*, is an epitome of Shaheen Akhtar in which she has recapitulated the search of women in all considerable diversity. Shaheen Akhtar captures the brutality of 1971 war of Liberation and its contingent afterlife scars that were left on women. Even, after long thirty years, Mariam lives with those brutal, cold-blooded memories that refuse to end for her. The issue of the Liberation war came up in the literature, due to Anuradha's invisible diary. Mariam remembers the incidents very clearly, mentioned in the invisible diary and she is able to illuminate the saga of the war from the point of view of the Biranganas, to the writers.

Keywords: Shaheen Akhtar, The Search, Biranganas, Bangladesh Liberation war, Invisible Diary, Anne Frank.

Introduction:

The most political incident of partition of India caused one of the greatest human upheaval of history. Unregarding the partition many in large numbers of people have parted or lost their homes and countries. Hardly in a few months time about twelve million of people were put out between the new, abridged India and the two winged, east and west Pakistan. More than ten million of refugees in the largest proportion went across the western border which divides the state of Punjab, many muslims moved to Pakistan and many other Hindus and Sikhs to east of India. Because everywhere, especially on boundary lines violence, slaughter and frequent bloodshed and bloodbath were noticed. And during the riots, across the border a hell was let loose, thus despite

giving lots of warnings to the new government of India and Pakistan were taken a back for the upheaval. They have not predicted the questions of fear among the Muslims and Hindus to be created by the drawing of the borders. The dilemma among the religious identities forced the people to flee to whichever safe place they considered, especially among their own fellow beings. This mass migration during partition had a deep impact on the normal lives of the women. Unfortunately these women were mainly tortured, ill treated, abused and mistreated. Simone de Beauvoir raises a core of questions on woman incarnation or personification. She further questions the existence of women's bodies being an advantage or disadvantage to society. Thus, she answers these questions by exploring their case studies on various stages of life. But she tries her best to open a space for the freedom of females to flourish.

The history and development of Bangladeshi English literature is closely immersed with the political changes and alternation of the Indian subcontinent. Some of the prime events of the region are the partition of Bengal Presidency in 1905 and its reversal in 1911, the partition of the subcontinent in 1947, the language movement of 1952 in east Pakistan, the independence of Bangladesh in 1971 and a profound and notable transformation of the socio-economic experience in the 1990s. Thus, all have profound influence and affect on this tradition of literature. Although the first Bangladeshi English novel *Sultana's Dreams* by Begum Rokeya in 1905 gained literary momentum only in the 1990s. The second decade of the 21st century observed and witnessed the publication of some of the best works like *The World in my Hands* by K Anis Ahmed (2013), *In the light of What We Know* by Zia Haider Rahman (2014), *Babu Bangladesh!* by Numair Atif (2019) and so on. Kaiser Haq, a translator, critic and academic, his writing in English language called an *Efflorescence* is to describe and narrate the present status of Bangladeshi English Literature. Few writers dominate the world of fiction in Bangladeshi writing in English. Many women writers are Monica Ali *Brick Lane* (2003), Nasreen Jahan *The Women Who Flew: Urukku* (1993), Shaheen Akhtar *Talaash* (2011) and Tahmina A *Golden Age* (2007). Monica Ali is a Bangladeshi born, British writer and novelist. Her debut novel *Brick Lane* (2003) was shortlisted for the Man Booker prize. The novel's name *Brick Lane* is named after a street in London, Brick Lane, which is a heart of London's Bangladeshi community. These Bangladeshi people look over different angles of emigrant lives and various methods of adaptations to alien people and culture. And through the fictional story of some Bengali immigrants living in London exposes a different culture and identity of the characters. Monica Ali presents various perspectives such as feminism, postcolonialism, race, ethnicity, and identity.

Another Bangladeshi novelist Anwar Pasha, who was picked up by the Pakistani army and their collaborators on December 14, 1971 and taken to Mirpur, where he was martyred. From his literary works, one of the novels, *Rifle, Roti, Aurat* is considered as a legendary work which was written during April-June 1971. It was first published in 1973 which was based on the situation in claustrophobic Dhaka on 25th-27th March and it became his last book. His legendary work was translated into English by Sudipto Shaheen who was a Professor of English Literature at Dhaka University. The story unfolds of the three days of injustices done to the people of the then East Pakistan by the dictatorial regimes of Ayub Khan, Yahya Khan and others. The novel vividly depicts many characters and scenes which makes the reader feel the anxiety, anguish, grief as well as the anger,

hope and determination generated in the mind of the Bengalees after the massacre of March 25, 1971. The novelist Anwar Pasha who witnessed the execution held in Dhaka University, sets the novel in the time of the three days following from 25th March to 27th March. With the help of conversations, the novel reveals the socio-political injustice and biased experience by the East Pakistani people and the unavoidable war of Liberation. The novel concludes with the confident statement of the one in question that East Pakistan will become Bangladesh or not. Unfortunately, Anwar Pasha could not see the victory he predicated on 14th December 1971. Because just two days before the end of the war, he was picked up from his house by the Pakistani army and was killed. The murder of all intellectual people that includes writers, artists, professors, schoolteachers, lawyers and doctors, were killed by spearhead by the order of Major General Rao Farman Ali with the planning and intentions to cripple East Bengal entirely. During the war of Liberation, 1971, many Bangladeshi intellectuals were killed. But, the largest number of executions took place on 25th March and 14th December 1971. And, the date 14th December is commemorated as Martyred Intellectuals Day in Bangladesh.

After independence, many Bangladeshi writers wrote from the experience of the War of Liberation and they became most engrossing and captivating novels. As from such happenings, *Talaash* novel is also one of novels from the war of Liberation. Shaheen Akhtar wrote *Talaash* in 2004 but later it was translated into English by Ella Dutta as *The Search* in 2011. Shaheen Akhtar is the author of five collections of short stories and three novels—*Palabar Path Nei* (No Escape Route); *Talaash* (The Search); and *Shokhi Rongomala*. *Talaash* won the Best Book of the Year Award for 2004 from *Prothom Alo*, the largest-circulation daily newspaper in Bangladesh. Akhtar has also edited the three-volume *Soti O Swotontora: Bangla Shahitye Nari*, about the portrayal of women in Bengali literature. She currently works for Ain O Salish Kendra (ASK), a human rights/legal aid organization in Dhaka, Bangladesh. In addition to her writing, Shaheen Akhtar is also involved in various social and cultural activities. She is a member of different literary and cultural organizations and has participated in various international literary festivals. She works as an editor in the Media and Communication Unit of Ain o Salish Kendra, a civil rights organization in Dhaka.

In the novel, *The Search*, the protagonist, Mariam or Mary, represents the turmoil of Bangladesh as a country. And, another character is Mukti who comes in digging deep into the history of the war, extracting a parallel story with the country's independence and resembles the character of the novel's author herself. Shaheen focuses more on the war women who find themselves dealing with the situation that is survival in the war. During the Bangladesh Liberation War in 1971, approximately 200,000 to 400,000 Bengali women were raped, assaulted and in many cases murdered by West Pakistani forces. Shaheen reveals the agony, sufferings and pain of all these raped women that happened in the military camps after twenty-years after the war. A young researches named Mukti want to write a novel on the survivor of wartime rape. Through the questions raised by Mukti and party by the means of flashbacks the reader is able to collect together as one piece of the experiences of all the women who were kept as sex slave by the Pakistani army. However, the Bangladeshi government honored these women the esteem title of Birangona, another word a war heroine, an actual healing and recovery was never accomplished. Being her second novel, Shaheen, unlike many acknowledged feminist novelists, has mostly

enlightened the women characters in her novel. And the story is apprised from a woman's point of view, which, when shifts, is passed on to another woman. On the whole the novel varies from the mode that reveals the reality of the war and presents the real picture altogether. The story begins with a girl named Mariam who is also known by her nickname of Mary and an interview is carried out by a young female researcher, Mukti, as she was born on that night when the Pakistani army set free from its horror violence on the people of Bangladesh. The novel opens in 1971, when Mariam is living in Dhaka as a student with her brother and is in love with a student leader of Dhaka University named as Abed. Mariam makes all efforts to convince Abed to take family responsibility for the coming baby but the young student activist has no plans to attempt to take the family responsibility but rather has no time for such matters as the movement of freedom is on heat. Mukti, name freedom, is a researcher who tries to solve Mariam's story and those of Biranganas. Mukti was born on the night of March 25, 1971, as called Operation Searchlight beings for The Search of mass violence in Bangladesh by the Pakistani soldiers. Similar in Salman Rushdie's 1981 novel, *Midnight's Children*, where Mukti is a child whose life is personalized with the life of a nation. By making her as the national women narrative who is made to go through a feminist and other characters are in search of the voices of raped women. Thus from this process complexity and uncertainty emerges. Mariam is a Birangana but in her words, was a young woman in love who was abandoned by her lover but at the same time had been violated by the Pakistani invaders. Shaheen tries to explain as Mariam's pregnant body is a symbol of female's vulnerability much before the rapes were committed on her. The Biranganas or the Warrior Women is the term that identifies a class of women after the 1971 war of Bangladesh Independence. They are the symbol of honor, valor and sacrifice which are righteousness for the freedom struggle. The irony of such a situation is these women who stood for the honor of their newborn country were dishonored and violated during the war. Mukti tries to find the answers from the complicated questions about the life of a Biranganas, and that too, Mariam. Shaheen puts together the various circumstances and desires of women which act as unavoidable clashes in Mariam's life. She is haunted by her personal demons of the dream which were unfulfilled and fights continuously to find herself rehabilitated in real society. Her life experience on violence and torture fades with the grief of being abandoned by all the men in her life like Jashimul Haque, Abed Jahangir, Mantaj, Debashish and alongwith it the desire to live, get married and have a child to raise also fades away. Shaheen puts her all efforts efficiently between emotional and emotionless passages displaying pain, hurt, jealousy, anger, unconcern and the most importantly helplessness. In the novel, there is a hidden opinion that clashes within the personal and public space but the fact is that woman's personal space is considered to be highly political as the body of woman is viewed as a possession of the men, mainly in the times of war. That to emphasize superiority and victory over the enemy by violating their honor. Therefore it is true that the Biranganas did pay willingly or helplessly for the freedom of Bangladesh as compared highly above the political ideologies and blood.

Many women writers wrote novels on war of Liberation 1971. Apart from Shaheen Akhtar, another novelist is Selina Hossain's *Hangor Nodi Grenade* (1976) which is a tragic story of a mother who decides her only child for the sake of the freedom of the country during the Liberation war of 1971. The mother hands over her mentally handicapped son a gun and at moment the Pakistani soldiers saw him and shot him. The mother sacrificed her son to save the two freedom fighters who were hiding in her house. This novel, with the same name, a film was made and it won the Bangladeshi National Film Award 1997 for Best Director, Best Story and Best Actress. Nilima Ibrahim interviewed some of the heroic women and kept a detailed journal of her experiences with them, which she later published in a book form *Ami Birangana Bolchi* 1994. Ibrahim used fictional names for her characters in order to protect their privacy. In her novel, Neela Haider, the main narrator of *Ami Birangana Bolchi (As a War heroine, I Speak)*, discloses the painful struggles of these women of war. Nilima Ibrahim conveys a message for the readers in support of these women that the women who suffer don't die easily. Even if they are tortured as much as the Pakistani soldiers want, they still breathe and survive. It was possible for all these war heroines to endure their brutal sexual torture only because they were women. Their sacrifice was to free this land and the earth which was under her bare feet. *Ami Birangana Bolchi* captures the heartbreaking, miserable and traumatic tales of seven war heroines in its seven chapters. The soulful narration and horrifying description make it one of the most impactful books ever written on the liberation war, as untold stories are often the most crucial ones.

Similar to *Ami Birangana Bolchi (As a War heroine, I Speak)* by Nilima Ibrahim, Shaheen Akhtar has also given a vivid fictional description of all the characters of war heroines in the novel. *Birangana*, means war heroine, which was a term coined by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, Bangladesh's founding Prime Minister, as a way of accepting these women's sacrifice for the freedom of Bangladesh. Mujib declared that about 200,000 Bengali women had been raped by Pakistani troops. However, these numbers were never proved, nor were the assassins of rapes or killings were brought to justice. Instead, these women began to live in their newborn country under a shadow of shame. While the term was originally meant to honour all women, political activists, freedom fighters and rape survivors but it slowly it became to identify those subjected to rape and sexual violence during the war as a label of a fallen woman. Therefore, *Birangana*, meaning changed into prostitute that is phonetically too close to *Birangana* for comfort. In turn, this gave rise to the activists to coin a new phrase, *nari jodha*, or women fighters. According to Shaheen, the misfortune followed the protagonist, Mariam, because as the "moment she arrived, things began happening." The room where all the girls were locked up by the Pakistani soldiers, seemed to be concerned for each other. May the girl be from a different village or city, there was a 'softness' in each and everyone. (TS, 86) Among these girls was a girl named Anuradha Sarkar, who "could predict the future without reading one's palm." She predicted about each girl's parents that they "denied the existence of their child, but she was merely obscuring her past. Indeed, she can no longer live with that past identity." (TS, 113). Shaheen writes down a sympathetic and understanding description about the talk between Mariam and Anuradha in the dark room. Shaheen expresses the feeling of Anuradha saying:

“If she had pen and paper, she would keep a prison diary like Anne Frank.”

And she did keep because she began recording “what she heard in her invisible diary.” (TS, 114). She started hearing the stories of each girl and began writing them in her invisible diary. Shobha Rani was dragged and raped by the soldiers and sent to the camp. Before leaving they killed her husband and left her mother-in-law crying alone in the house. Another “happy, smiling girl named Jaba” was spotted dead “after a gang rape.” (TS, 115). One more girl called Shyamali Rahman who was also released after the liberation war but Mariam found her hanging around in front of the Pakistani embassy with a rusty knife in her hand. Because she wanted to kill the men as one of the Pakistani soldiers promised her for “marriage but in the end did not keep his promise.” Mariam remembers Anuradha who had predicated in her invisible diary:

“Soaring in the sphere of deathlessness, she came to ground like a bird with broken wings. And from then on she began thinking that war would end, this war will also end. But they would never be able to go back to their identities, never regain their former addresses. Their place would be in the warehouses of their own land and in foreign lands.” (TS, 119)

So, unpredictably it became true, the Biranganas could not go back to their parental house and just waited for their parents or relatives to come and meet them. One more girl Bindubala, daughter of Jogen Baniya, who was renamed as Laili Begum was also captured on the same day Mariam was. Her luck did not favour her, as she was simply pouring dal over the rice to make her younger siblings to eat it. But before she could reach them “a soldier grabbed her.” (TS, 119). Among these women was a freedom fighter, Parul, who knew how to hold a gun and fire the rifle. But her situation was different as at that moment all men and women were fighting against the enemy. She was lied by one of her fellow-freedom fighters who sold her to this warehouse. She says that “Until I was captured, I wasn’t safe at any moment—safe with my honour or my life.” (TS, 123) Mariam, too, was not safe in the hands of the soldiers. She was “brought out and flung at the feet of a drunk.” (TS, 127) However, Anuradha kept up the spirit of all the girls by convincing them to live like that. She says, “Just as soldiers cannot fight a war when they lose their confidence, so with us. We won’t survive if we lose our will power.” (TS, 117). When these girls heard that their country was about to be liberated, the question arises if the country becomes independent then where would they go. Anuradha had says:

“Do you think our countrymen will greet us with garlands? No, Mary, nothing like that has happened in the history of the world. When the war ends, the men are acclaimed as heroes and the women are described as fallen. Just you watch, they will turn us into whores.” (TS, 137)

Anuradha was an expert in giving a commentary on the lives of soldiers and the reason for them in looting Bangladesh. She predicted the purpose and aim of the Pakistani soldiers to leave Bangladesh. She continued to note down in her invisible diary:

“There is no visible enemy before the invaders now...Living in fear of the unseen enemy, the Pakistani soldiers are losing their reason. They are directionless. Under pressure in this way, they will lose their confidence and will be able to fight. They will remember their homes...happy, safe, luxurious lives...That is why the authorities have lifted all restrictions.” (TS,115).

Anuradha gives warmth and comfort with her words to all the girls present in the room. Here, she gives a cause of the soldiers helplessness and to control their limits. Therefore, they can simply “loot, murder, rape as freely as they can.” (TS,116. Mariam was surprised to hear the prediction made by Anuradha, that after the war when the investigation team comes in search of these rooms. “...they will not be able to make out whether men and women were confined here.” After saying such words, she immediately pulled out her tangled hair and while holding it, she predicted, “This hair will bear testimony in the future.” (TS, 116).

Conclusion:

The best form of writing the novel is to raise a question for the women. As the woman is victimized by the evils and these evils are made up of unstable political events in the societies, in the countries and in the world. The woman is always at risk and unsafe as she is an easy target to humiliate, discriminate, and deprived. Thus, they maintain sociological, physical and psychological problems. On such bases, a question is raised about the status of women in the society. Shaheen Akhtar is a celebrated writer in Bangladesh who is known for her insightful portrayal of the human condition, particularly of women, in Bangladeshi society. Her works continue to inspire and resonate with readers across generations.

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